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The House I Live In.
A History of Suburbia and the American Dream.

Relatrice

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Summary

La tesi analizza il rapporto tra lo sviluppo del concetto di Suburbia negli Stati Uniti e del concetto di American Dream, ricostruendone l'evoluzione storica dal periodo coloniale fino agli attentati dell'11 settembre 2001. L'obiettivo è mostrare come i *suburbs* non costituiscano soltanto una particolare forma di insediamento residenziale, ma rappresentino anche un'espressione spaziale di valori profondamente radicati nella società statunitense, quali libertà, spazio, individualismo, proprietà privata, mobilità sociale e ricerca della felicità. Parallelamente, la ricerca considera le forze economiche, politiche, sociali e culturali che hanno contribuito alla formazione e alla diffusione di questo modello, nonché le dinamiche di inclusione ed esclusione che lo hanno caratterizzato.

Il lavoro parte dalla definizione dei concetti di città, urbano, suburbano e Suburbia. Quest'ultima viene distinta dal semplice *suburb* inteso come categoria urbanistica: essa viene interpretata come un insieme di immagini, valori e aspirazioni associate alla casa, al terreno di proprietà, alla famiglia, alla privacy e alla comunità. In questa prospettiva, la relazione tra casa di proprietà e American Dream costituisce uno dei fili conduttori dell'intera ricerca. Fin dalle origini degli Stati Uniti, infatti, la disponibilità di terra e la possibilità di possederla furono associate a indipendenza, successo individuale e mobilità sociale. Il mito della frontiera contribuì a rafforzare l'idea secondo cui l'allontanamento dalla città e la conquista di nuovi spazi rappresentassero una forma di realizzazione personale.

La prima fase della suburbanizzazione americana viene analizzata a partire dall'inizio del XIX secolo, quando la crescita delle città industriali e le condizioni di congestione e insalubrità dei centri urbani spinsero parte della popolazione verso le aree periferiche. La nascita dei primi *suburbs* fu resa possibile dall'evoluzione dei sistemi di trasporto, dal

traghetto a vapore alle ferrovie, dai tram alle ferrovie sopraelevate. La possibilità di risiedere lontano dal luogo di lavoro mantenendo un collegamento quotidiano con la città trasformò progressivamente il rapporto tra spazio residenziale e spazio produttivo. Nel *suburb* si affermò così un modello di abitazione che combinava i vantaggi della città con quelli della campagna, privilegiando case indipendenti, giardini, privacy e separazione dal congestionato ambiente urbano.

Nel corso della seconda metà del XIX secolo, tale modello si consolidò attraverso lo sviluppo di quartieri pianificati e di nuove forme di paesaggio residenziale. La diffusione della cultura del prato, delle strade alberate, delle grandi proprietà e delle comunità suburbane contribuì a trasformare il suburbio in un luogo associato alla rispettabilità e al successo. La possibilità di allontanarsi progressivamente dal centro, tuttavia, dipendeva dalle risorse economiche disponibili. La suburbanizzazione divenne pertanto anche un processo di differenziazione sociale e spaziale.

Per interpretare la struttura della città americana del primo Novecento, la tesi si confronta con la Scuola di Chicago e, in particolare, con il modello delle zone concentriche di Ernest Burgess. La città viene rappresentata come un organismo caratterizzato da una successione di zone sociali e funzionali, nelle quali la mobilità residenziale accompagna processi di trasformazione economica e sociale. Il movimento verso l'esterno del ceto medio e delle classi più abbienti si accompagna al progressivo trasferimento verso il centro di popolazioni immigrate e gruppi socialmente ed economicamente più deboli. La mobilità spaziale diventa quindi anche una forma di mobilità sociale. L'automobile introduce successivamente una trasformazione decisiva: la diffusione del Model T, la costruzione di strade e autostrade e la crescente dipendenza dal trasporto privato ampliano enormemente lo spazio accessibile alla residenza suburbana.

La Grande Depressione e, soprattutto, la Seconda guerra mondiale rappresentano un punto di svolta. Nel secondo dopoguerra, la suburbanizzazione raggiunge una scala senza precedenti grazie all'interazione tra politiche pubbliche, sistema finanziario, industria edilizia e crescita dei consumi. Il GI Bill, i mutui garantiti dalla Federal Housing Administration e dalla Veterans Administration, la riduzione dei tassi di interesse e la standardizzazione della costruzione resero l'acquisto della casa accessibile a un numero crescente di famiglie. Le Levittowns rappresentano l'esempio più emblematico di questo processo: attraverso la produzione standardizzata e su larga scala, l'abitazione suburbana divenne un prodotto di massa.

La suburbanizzazione postbellica non fu tuttavia esclusivamente un fenomeno residenziale. Essa fu accompagnata dalla diffusione dell'automobile, dei centri commerciali, dei drive-in e di una nuova cultura del consumo. La casa suburbana divenne il centro di una più ampia economia fondata sulla proprietà privata, sul credito e sul consumo di massa. In questo contesto, la suburbia acquisì anche una dimensione internazionale. Durante la Guerra fredda, l'immagine dell'America composta da famiglie proprietarie, abitazioni unifamiliari e beni di consumo fu contrapposta al modello sovietico di proprietà collettiva e di abitazione in grandi complessi residenziali. La suburbia divenne così anche uno strumento di soft power, attraverso il quale la prosperità materiale americana veniva presentata come espressione della libertà e della superiorità del sistema capitalistico.

Il processo fu però caratterizzato da profonde disuguaglianze. Le politiche abitative e finanziarie del dopoguerra favorirono prevalentemente le famiglie bianche della classe media, mentre gli afroamericani incontrarono ostacoli nell'accesso ai mutui e alla proprietà suburbana attraverso pratiche di redlining, discriminazione immobiliare, zoning e restrictive covenants. La segregazione residenziale fu inoltre rafforzata dalla costruzione delle autostrade e dai programmi di urban renewal, che in numerosi casi provocarono la distruzione

di quartieri afroamericani e popolari. Suburbia rappresentò quindi contemporaneamente una promessa di mobilità sociale e uno spazio nel quale furono riprodotte forme di esclusione razziale ed economica.

La tesi analizza inoltre le interpretazioni dello sviluppo metropolitano elaborate da Chauncy Harris ed Edward Ullman. Il loro Multiple Nuclei Model permette di superare la concezione monocentrica della città proposta da Burgess e di interpretare la progressiva decentralizzazione delle funzioni urbane. La crescita metropolitana non comporta necessariamente la scomparsa del centro, ma la formazione di una rete di nuclei specializzati e interconnessi. Questa prospettiva permette di comprendere come, nel corso della seconda metà del XX secolo, le attività commerciali, industriali, amministrative e ricreative abbiano seguito la popolazione verso le aree suburbane.

Parallelamente alla continua espansione suburbana, dagli anni Cinquanta si sviluppa un processo di ritorno verso le aree centrali: la gentrificazione. La tesi la interpreta attraverso i contributi di Neil Smith e Sharon Zukin, concentrandosi in particolare sulla teoria del rent gap. Il divario tra il valore effettivo e quello potenziale del suolo, prodotto da disinvestimento e devalorizzazione, crea condizioni favorevoli al reinvestimento e alla trasformazione dei quartieri. La gentrificazione viene inoltre interpretata come una forma di “frontiera interna”, nella quale capitali e gruppi sociali si appropriano di spazi urbani precedentemente marginalizzati. Il fenomeno evidenzia la tensione tra valorizzazione economica, trasformazione urbana e permanenza delle popolazioni residenti.

Il ritorno al centro non determina tuttavia la fine della suburbanizzazione. Al contrario, i due processi procedono parallelamente all'interno di una più ampia ristrutturazione metropolitana. La decentralizzazione delle attività economiche porta alla nascita di nuovi poli suburbani, nei quali si concentrano uffici, attività commerciali, servizi e infrastrutture ricreative. La suburbanizzazione assume così una forma più complessa: non si

limita più alla costruzione di quartieri residenziali periferici, ma produce vere e proprie centralità alternative. È in questo contesto che emergono le *edge cities*, interpretate come un'intensificazione della logica suburbana piuttosto che come una sua negazione.

L'ultima parte della ricerca si concentra sulla trasformazione della città americana attraverso il caso di Los Angeles e le interpretazioni della Los Angeles School. La storia urbana della metropoli californiana mostra come la dispersione territoriale non sia un fenomeno esclusivamente recente. Già tra la fine del XIX e l'inizio del XX secolo, ferrovie, streetcar, speculazione immobiliare e sviluppo agricolo favorirono la formazione di numerosi insediamenti distribuiti nella Los Angeles Basin. L'automobile, la costruzione delle freeway, la crescita dell'industria aerospaziale e della difesa e l'espansione postbellica rafforzarono successivamente questa struttura policentrica. Los Angeles diventa quindi un esempio paradigmatico di metropoli nella quale la distinzione tra città e *suburb* diventa progressivamente meno netta.

La Los Angeles School interpreta questa trasformazione attraverso una concezione frammentata e policentrica dello spazio urbano, nella quale i processi di sviluppo sono influenzati non soltanto dalle dinamiche locali, ma anche dai flussi globali di capitale. *Edge cities*, postsuburbia e *gated communities* rappresentano alcune delle forme attraverso cui la suburbanizzazione viene ulteriormente trasformata. Le comunità recintate, in particolare, accentuano la ricerca di sicurezza e separazione sociale, fino a produrre quella che Mike Davis definisce la “*fortress city*”. In questo quadro, il timore della criminalità, dell'insicurezza e del degrado urbano contribuisce a rafforzare ulteriormente l'attrazione esercitata dagli spazi suburbani.

Il percorso storico si conclude con gli attentati dell'11 settembre 2001, interpretati nella tesi come un momento di ulteriore rafforzamento delle dinamiche di securitizzazione dello spazio urbano e della tradizionale diffidenza nei confronti della città. L'analisi

complessiva mostra tuttavia che la suburbia non costituisce una realtà statica. Dalle prime abitazioni periferiche alle streetcar suburbs, dalle Levittowns alle comunità recintate e alle edge cities, la sua forma fisica è cambiata profondamente in risposta alle trasformazioni economiche, tecnologiche, politiche e sociali della società americana. A permanere è invece una promessa fondamentale: quella di associare la proprietà della casa alla disponibilità di spazio, alla privacy, alla sicurezza, all'indipendenza e alla possibilità di costruire una vita migliore.

La ricerca evidenzia pertanto il forte e persistente legame tra suburbia e American Dream. Suburbia può essere considerata una delle principali manifestazioni spaziali di quest'ultimo, ma anche uno spazio attraversato da contraddizioni: tra libertà e isolamento, mobilità e dipendenza dall'automobile, prosperità ed esclusione, individualismo e comunità. La sua storia permette quindi di leggere, attraverso l'organizzazione dello spazio residenziale, alcune delle principali trasformazioni della società e dell'identità americana.

Introduction

On a frosty January morning of 2026, I left my house in Jamison, Pennsylvania, to reach my office in center city Philadelphia. At the time, I was interning at the Italian Consulate General in Philadelphia and the commute entailed firstly a car ride to Warminster station, then an hour long train journey to Suburban station in center city Philadelphia, and finally a brief walk to the consulate. One ought to pay attention to the road while driving, but the repetitiveness of that morning commute made me pay attention to my surroundings in a broader sense. That morning, I paid closer attention to the way homes were placed on my way to the station. Starting from a very typical American suburb, I made my way to the train station in Warminster to catch the SEPTA (SouthEastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority) Warminster Line train to Philadelphia.¹



Figure 1. A snowy January morning in Jamison, Pennsylvania.

¹ For the moment, I appeal to the reader's understanding of what an American suburb is. This concept will be thoroughly explored in this work.

While warming up on the train, I realized I was exempted from paying attention to the road and I could focus the totality of my attention to the landscape that was unfolding outside of the train's window. As we made our way to downtown Philadelphia, I noticed that the scenery would abruptly change. The suburban, single-family homes that had characterized my commute up to Fern Rock station were replaced by more densely built residential neighborhoods. Fern Rock is indeed the first urban conglomerate within Philadelphia's city limits. As the train approached the end of its ride, the scenery - at this point urban - turned decadent, with old rowhouses and poorly landscaped back yards.



Figure 2. Downtown Philadelphia seen from the train.

What stunned me was the speed at which an affluent neighborhood changed into a decadent one. Sometimes it seems as if someone purposefully drew a line to separate rich from poor, a *limes* between rags and riches. When I got off the train at Suburban station, all I could see were office workers who, just like me, fast-pacedly walked to their office. Had they not been there, I would have probably felt very unsafe, for the American downtown is often

characterized by the presence of homeless people and drug users. The corporate headquarters and the limping loiterers in front of their entrances proved a stark contrast.

I found this fast liminality and residential pattern to be absent in Europe. Indeed, European city centres are usually full of life even without the presence of office workers. And while crime is surging in Europe also, one generally tends to feel safer than in an American downtown. Moreover, in an European city, the wealthiest areas usually coincide with the city centre. Both wealth and safety generally tend to dissipate as one moves further outward. There is firstly a peripheral residential area and then, at the border of the city, there is ultimately the poorest area, characterized by public housing complexes, which are oftentimes poverty-laden and crime-ridden. Nevertheless, the decline of both wealth and safety is gradual. Tourists wandering in a European city have time to realize that they are about to leave the nicer, touristy parts of the city and have time to turn around safely and trace their steps back to where they are supposed to be. In the United States, when tourists realize that they are in the wrong area, it might already be too late. For example, in Las Vegas the Interstate highway 15 separates the glamorous Strip resorts from the older, rougher parts of Sin City. That is the case of many cities in the United States.

The aspect that interested me the most was how different the relation between wealthy neighborhoods and distance to the centre was in the United States compared to Europe. Starting from downtown, the inner city immediately close to downtown felt unsafe and poor, and as one distances himself/herself from the central part of the city, the quality of housing and safety improved drastically. The further from downtown, the better the landscape was. And the suburban areas are not devoid of urban amenities such as restaurants and grocery stores. If anything, the suburban setting provides ample, free parking lots which are often absent in almost every major American city.² I remembered that the suburban neighborhoods

² While parking ramps and garages are available in an urban setting, they are often very expensive.

I left that morning were very similar to the ones one can see in almost every movie or TV series shot in the United States. The tree lined drives with single family homes with their neatly landscaped front yards and the cars parked in the driveways are as omnipresent in the cultural representation of non-urban America as the yellow taxis are for the representation of New York City. Every tourist who purposefully or not purposefully ends up in the suburbs will stare in awe at the homes he/she had always seen on the silver screen. The American suburbs seem to have become a monument worthy of having a picture taken of them. I must confess I am guilty of this practice, too.

The reason why suburbs became attached to American imagery is complex and goes beyond the entertainment industry. The bond between the suburbs and the American Dream has been sewn by economic, political and social forces that bound together homeownership and success. Indeed, owning a house in the suburbs became the epitome of “making it” in American society, the peak of the American way of life. And this idea was fueled by the entertainment industry to make it appealing to as many people as possible, given the fulfillment of certain criteria, namely wealth and race. The connection between homeownership in Suburbia and the American Dream goes back into the history of this relatively young nation. From the earliest moments of the United States’ history, there has been an anti-urban bias in American life. Indeed, American cities jumped from being relatively small settlements to full-blown industrial cities. In the midst of this process, “urban culture [...] was provisional and insecure”.³ Then, in the midst of the Great Depression on December 2nd, 1931, then President Herbert Hoover addressed the President’s Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership by saying that “those immortal ballads, *Home Sweet Home*, *My Old Kentucky Home*, and *The Little Gray Home in the West*, were not written about apartments” and that “they never sing sang songs about a pile of rent receipts”.⁴ He also

³ James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere, the Rise and Decline of America’s Man-made Landscape*, Simon & Schuster, 1993, p. 39.

⁴ Davis Mike, *City of Quartz*, Verso, 1990, p. 157.

stated that “they were written about an individual abode, alive with the tender associations of childhood, the family life at the fireside, the free out of doors, the independence, the security, and the pride in possession of the family's own home-the very seat of its being”, and that “to own one's own home is a physical expression of individualism, of enterprise, of independence, and of the freedom of spirit. We do not in our imagination attach to a transitory place that expression about a man's home being his castle, no matter what its constitutional rights may be”.⁵ In those years, renting had been demonized through *why pay rent?* campaigns aiming at eliminating - or at least curbing - housing shortages and at boosting the economy after World War I.⁶ It is therefore clear that homeownership was tightly connected to the American spirit and the qualities inherent to American society, among them individualism, freedom and material success. Owning a home had inserted itself in the fabric of the nation, in a national narrative that defines what being a true American means.

The bond between homeownership in the suburbs and the American Dream was officially sealed in 1938, when the Federal National Mortgage Association was founded. From the beginning, the Federal National Mortgage Association - or Fannie Mae - provided government-sponsored credit for homebuyers. In an advertisement, Fannie Mae stated “we are in the American Dream business”.⁷ After World War II, homeownership was fostered through the GI Bill and VA-sponsored mortgages for veterans, rendering homeownership a reality for millions of American families. It was in the post World War II suburbanization that the typical American neighborhood was formed, creating a new piece in the puzzle of American identity.

From the 1960s through the 1990s, two different trends evolved from American suburbanization. On one hand, there has been a return to the city, which had been abandoned

⁵ Hoover Herbert, *President's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership*, December 2nd, 1931.

⁶ Hayden Dolores, *Building Suburbia, Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000*, Vintage Books, 2004, pp. 88-89.

⁷ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, p. 3.

and left to the working classes and the poorest elements of society. This phenomenon is called gentrification. On the other hand, the idea of suburbanization has been brought to the extreme, creating outer cities and exasperating urban - or rather suburban - sprawl to a level in which the suburbs became an entity in their own right, partially or completely disconnected from the urban center they once contoured.

The objective of this thesis is to draw an historical evolution of the American suburb from the early days of the United States to the new millennium. This analysis is accompanied by economic, political, and social insights. In addition, the relationship between Suburbia and the American Dream will be analyzed through the patterns of inclusion and exclusion and other geographical lenses. The first chapter covers a history and analysis of the suburbs from the colonial era to World War II. Importance will be given to the Chicago school of urban planning. The second chapter covers the history of post World War II Suburbia, which represented the peak of suburban settlement in the United States. The third chapter analyzes a return to the city through the lenses of gentrification and the fourth chapter deals with the passage from modernism to postmodernism with a focus on Los Angeles and the homonymous school of urban planning. Finally, the analysis ends with the 9/11 attacks, which sealed the deal for the anti-urban sentiment of American society and gave way to processes of both securitization and uricide. The concluding chapter also contains the final remarks and leads for further research.

As America⁸ is set to turn 250 on July 4th, 2026, I find this thesis to be particularly important. Drawing a historical and social overview of the relationship between Suburbia and the American Dream allows us to understand American society domestically and internationally. From the domestic standpoint, the relationship between economic success and social success goes through homeownership, fueling narratives of hope, dreams and freedom.

⁸ I may use the terms *America* and *the United States of America* interchangeably. Therefore, when I write about America I mean the country and not the whole American continent.

Freedom to live wherever one wants, freedom to choose which neighbors to have or not have. As stated by Kenneth Jackson in his masterpiece on Suburbia, “housing is an outward expression of the inner human nature; no society can be fully understood apart from the residences of its members”.⁹ From the standpoint of international relations, one can understand the policy decisions of America’s leaders because they often are the product of Suburbia. Voting patterns and party allegiance strongly depend on the residential setting, as outlined by political scientists Lipset and Rokkan in 1967. According to their study, one of the four political cleavages is between urban and rural inhabitants. It is interesting to understand politics in America’s suburbs, which are neither urban nor rural.¹⁰ In addition, the economic power of the United States of America irradiates through Suburbia or the byproducts thereof. As reported by Sharon Zukin, “economic power provides the structural coherence behind America’s shifting landscapes ... the American landscape is a series of unbounded spaces where mass production and mass consumption reproduce a standardized, quasi global culture”.¹¹ As a consequence, what is produced for Suburbia and what is consumed in Suburbia is funneled through the entertainment industry to create trends and - apparent - needs to the global audience. Also, America’s armed forces - which, together with economic aid, are essential for America’s foreign policy and the fulfillment of America’s interests abroad - are often fueled by those who can not access Suburbia or the other amenities that suburban life offers, from healthy grocery stores to a college education.¹² Whether this social division of social opportunities through housing is intentional or not is

⁹ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier, the Suburbanization of the United States*, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 3.

¹⁰ Seymour Lipset & Stein Rokkan, *Party Systems and Voter Alignments*, Free Press, 1967, p. 14.

¹¹ Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power, from Detroit to Disney World*, University of California Press, 1991, p. 20.

¹² A critique of the correlation between serving in the armed forces and the American Dream can be found in the art work by Laurent Elie Badessi named *American Dream*. The work is composed of 5 pictures, each representing one soldier from branches from the U.S. military (namely one sailor, one pilot, one army man, a UN troop and a marine). Each soldier is blindfolded by an American flag and their nametags spell the sentence *ceci n’est pas un rêve*, meaning *this is not a dream*. Mimicking Magritte’s famous artwork, serving the country in the name of the American Dream seems to be just an illusion to escape from reality.

discussed in this work. Have the inalienable rights promised in the Declaration of Independence - especially the pursuit of happiness - been upheld for all Americans?¹³

Before I start delving into the history of Suburbia, it is important to clarify three main terms that are the backbone of this analysis: urban, suburban, and Suburbia.

The urban form is best represented by the city. In 1937, Lewis Mumford described the city as a “related collection of primary groups and purposive associations . . . [that] support themselves through economic organizations that are likewise of a more or less corporate, or at least publicly regulated, character”. Mumford also stated that “the essential physical means of a city’s existence are the fixed site, the durable shelter, the permanent facilities for assembly, interchange and storage”, while the essential social means are the division of labor. In addition, the city is “a geographic plexus, an economic organization, an institutional process, a theater of social action, and an aesthetic symbol of collective unity”.¹⁴

Another insight about what urban and the city mean comes from Louis Wirth. In his 1938 essay “Urbanism as a Way of Life”, Wirth analyzes the three propositions that form and differentiate relations and relationships in an urban settlement, namely a large population, a higher density of inhabitants and the heterogeneity thereof.¹⁵ Given the larger number of people in a city, the result of the interactions among themselves is varied because of their very different backgrounds, occupations and personal traits. The result of said interactions is segmental. Given the fact that urban dwellers are not dependent on each other as rural inhabitants, the accent of the interactions is almost exclusively utilitarian.¹⁶

Furthermore, a higher density among individuals with no emotional ties seems to foster a spirit of competition and mutual exploitation. As Wirth reports, “frequent close

¹³ The Declaration of Independence, signed on July 4th, 1776, states that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”.

¹⁴ Mumford Lewis, “What is a City?”, *The City Reader*, edited by Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout, Routledge, 2015, p. 112.

¹⁵ Wirth Louis, “Urbanism as a Way of Life”, *The City Reader*, edited by Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout, Routledge, 2015, p. 117.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

physical contact, coupled with great social distance, accentuates the reserve of unattached individuals toward one another, and, unless compensated for by other opportunities for response, gives rise to loneliness”.¹⁷ Finally, the third element is heterogeneity. The heterogeneous interactions among urban dwellers differentiates the class structures, tearing apart the rigid class rules, thus creating an increased social mobility. The result of this process is the rapid turnover of people in a city. The city is a transitory habitat in which residence, employment and income fluctuate.¹⁸

Wirth goes on to state specific characteristics of cities. First of all, from an ecological perspective, cities provide more services than rural areas. Therefore, the areas surrounding the central *polis* are dependent upon the latter.¹⁹ Also, urban conglomerates tend to have more women than men, more migrants, less elderly and kids, with the death rate higher than the birth rate. In addition, the social organization of the city makes city life go against the traditional families, for marriages are postponed and women work. The wages are higher, but so is the cost of life. Moreover, social issues seem to be more prominent in the city than in a rural setting.²⁰ More recently, urban geographer Edward Soja reflected upon the principle of *synekism*, which is the stimulus of urban agglomeration. According to Soja, “synkeism ... connotes ... the economic and ecological interdependencies and the creative ... synergisms that arise from the purposeful clustering and collective cohabitation of people in space”.²¹

Because of what Ebenezer Howard described as the “Town-Country Magnet”²² and the anti-urban bias of American life, a new residential pattern emerged in the 1800s: the

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 119.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 119-120.

¹⁹ While this was true when Wirth wrote his essay, the concept of rural or extra-urban dependence on the city will gradually decrease after World War II to almost vanish at the end of the 1990s.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 120-123.

²¹ Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis, Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*, Blackwell Publishers, 2000, pp. 12-18.

²² The magnet theorized by Howard in 1898 was supposed to attract people from both the city and the countryside to a solution which would convey the best of both worlds. Both the town magnet and the country magnet had advantages and disadvantages, whereas the town-country magnet has only advantages. For more on the topic, please refer to Ebenezer Howard, “The Town-Country Magnet”, *The City Reader*, edited by Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout, Routledge, 2015, pp. 371-378.

suburbs.²³ According to Kenneth Jackson, it is difficult to univocally define what a suburb is. Indeed, as reported by Jackson, “economists assign suburban status on the basis of functional relationships between the core and the surrounding region; demographers on the basis of residential density or commuting patterns; architects on the basis of building type; and sociologists on the basis of behaviour or ‘way of life’”.²⁴ Nevertheless, the working definition of what suburbs are provided by Jackson has four main components. Firstly, the function of the suburbs is non-farm residential. Secondly, suburbs are inhabited by middle to upper class people. Thirdly, separation from the city centre and the job, for suburbs entail a daily journey to work. Lastly, the density in the suburbs is lower than older sections of the city.²⁵ Thus, Jackson summarizes the aforementioned components stating that “affluent and middle-class Americans live in suburban areas that are far from their work places, in homes that they own, and in the center of yards that by urban standards elsewhere are enormous”.²⁶

Therefore, suburbs are “small, controlled communities where for the most part everyone has the same living standards, the same weeds, the same number of garbage cans, the same house plans, and the same level in the septic tanks”.²⁷

Ultimately, Suburbia is more than just a planning type. Suburbia is a state of mind based on imagery and symbolism. The suburbs *per se* are not the embodiment of the American Dream, Suburbia is - albeit paradoxically immaterial. Suburbia is the embodiment of the cult of domesticity, of an American Dream based on house, land and community.²⁸ More than that, American material and spatial wealth allowed for the preservation of privacy and isolation through urban sprawl. Indeed, Jackson notes that “the rapid suburbanization of the United States cannot be viewed in isolation from the material prosperity of its people and

²³ For the purpose of this thesis, only suburbs in the United States will be analyzed.

²⁴ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, p. 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁸ Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, p. 6.

the sheer abundance of its land”.²⁹ The association between Suburbia and the values of domesticity was formed in the nineteenth century and would prevail in the twentieth century. The idea of a house being a man’s castle, the value of land and the true meaning of real estate were bound to Suburbia and the American Dream.³⁰ And although the material production of Suburbia shaped American wealth and indebtedness, Suburbia has for many decades been the site of promise and dreams, where Americans have located their ambitions and ideals.³¹ The American Dream has always been freedom, space, individualism, wealth, and the best embodiment of all these values is nothing other than Suburbia.

²⁹ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, p. 128.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-55.

³¹ Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, pp. 3-4.

Chapter 1: My Kind of Town

The anti-urban bias of American life fueled urban sprawl first and suburban sprawl later. From the earliest days of the United States' history, one myth in particular romanticized the flight from the urban environment: the myth of the frontier. Those brave men and women who took a leap of faith into the unknown, far away from the urban settlements to pave the way for the settlement of the North American continent, fighting off tribes of Native Americans and wildlife, enduring through scorching heat in the Southwest and freezing winters in the Great Plains to build America *from sea to shining sea* achieved the title of American heroes.³²

Indeed, when the pilgrims first arrived at Plymouth Harbor in 1620, they regarded the surrounding area as the Garden of Eden.³³ The same sentiment was shared by the tens of millions of immigrants who throughout the centuries explored, conquered and settled the North American continent. Most of the early migration to the American Colonies first - and the United States later - came from Europe, a continent chronically plagued by overpopulation and the related social unrest. It is in the vastness of America that the hopes and dreams of millions of people were fulfilled and their potential unleashed.

Nevertheless, land in America soon became a vital part of the Protestant ethic. As a matter of fact, land was quickly and inextricably tied to profit and individualism. Right after the Revolutionary War was over, companies like the Wabash and the Ohio and powerful individuals (George Washington and banker Robert Morris to name a few) acquired immense amounts of land and normalized the sale thereof for a profit. Speculation was common and "American land law was predicated on the paramount principle that land was first and

³² The myth of the frontiersman enlightening Native Americans is best represented by the 1872 painting *American Progress* by John Gast.

³³ James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere*, pp. 17-18.

foremost a commodity for capital gain”.³⁴ Land was seen as a civil liberty and not as a social resource. Not even the government, under the provisions of the fifth amendment to the constitution, could take private property for public use without due process and just compensation.³⁵

The ability to acquire land was strictly connected to the idea of Protestant success. According to Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, competition was not regarded negatively, nor was material success. On the contrary, “making it” was the direct, tangible result of one’s personal value.³⁶ In addition, importance was given to distancing from others.³⁷ The emptiness of the American continent was the canvas, the ambitious new Americans the painters. In the early days of America, being a landowner was a symbol of success and virtue, one of the first expressions of the American Dream. This view was later articulated in the urban and suburban settings.

By the early 1800s, cities on the East Coast of the United States were already crowded. In cities like New York and Boston, factories, offices, shops and markets were conveniently placed close by for commercial purposes. While their placement favored businesses, it rendered life complicated and unsanitary for the people who lived there. Early on, those who had the means to move decided to live at the edge of the city, in the so-called borderlands.³⁸ Here, albeit far from business and work, families could enjoy clean air, pure water and the stillness of nature without being in a rural setting. Indeed, the borderlands were neither urban nor rural. They were perhaps the result of the “Town and Country Magnet”

³⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 26-27. The fifth amendment recites “No person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a Grand Jury, except in cases arising in the land or naval forces, or in the Militia, when in actual service in time of War or public danger; nor shall any person be subject for the same offence to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb; nor shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself, nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation”.

³⁶ Richard Sennett, “Les villes américaines: plan orthogonal et éthique protestante”, *Histoires de Villes. Culture et Économie Politique des Espaces Urbains*, Unesco, 1990, p. 315.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 319.

³⁸ Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, pp. 21-22.

mentioned in the introduction. People living in the borderlands clashed with farmers. The same land had a contested purpose, for the former saw it as a leisurely asset, while the latter as a profitable one. With a gradually increasing amount of people moving to the borderlands, enterprises specialized in the subdivision, sale and development of residential property emerged. Their business was tailored to middle class families who, to the best of their abilities, tried to combine the quality of life of living in nature with the convenience of living close to a city all in one residence. These residences were a middle ground between the urban rowhouse and the country farmhouse, which were both left to the lower classes of the city and country alike.³⁹

Hence, the first American suburbs were established. Kenneth Jackson argues that although cities like Philadelphia, Boston and New York had already suburbs before the Revolutionary War,⁴⁰ the systematic growth of fringe areas more quickly than city centres and the beginning of a daily commute to jobs in the city began from about 1815 and inaugurated the era of suburbanization.⁴¹

At that time, cities in the United States - regarded by Jackson as “walking cities”, for the most common method of moving around was by foot - shared some similarities. The first one was congestion. Lots were small and streets were narrow. This created a huge discrepancy with the completely rural areas that were just a couple of miles away from the cities’ core. The second characteristic was the clear distinction between city and country. There was no middle ground, and one could easily recognize the end of the city without there being signs or walls. The third characteristic was the heterogeneity of functions. Indeed, there were no districts dedicated just to a specific function, be it entertainment, government or production. Public and private buildings were often interspersed. The fourth characteristic

³⁹ Ibid., p.23.

⁴⁰ Philadelphia’s Society Hill began forming as a suburb from 1739 when the Shippen brothers began selling parts of their land as house lots, while New York’s Greenwich village was well established by 1775.

⁴¹ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, p. 13.

was the short distance one had to commute from work. Since the majority of people walked to their jobs, they could not live far away from their occupation. Oftentimes, living and work spaces were integrated, with the shop at street level and the dwelling on top of it. The fifth characteristic is the usual tendency for respectable addresses to be located in the center of town. In the earliest days of the suburbs, before 1815, when they were still at the fringes of cities rather than in the country, they were also populated by “undesirables”. The city center briefly remained the elective residence of wealthy people and businesses, while poorer families and African Americans were segregated in the outskirts of town. For example, in 1790, the occupational distribution of the people residing in the Philadelphia early suburb of Southwark showed that only 17 percent of its residents had a white collar occupation, while 45 percent had a blue collar occupation and the remaining 38 percent was composed of slaves and “free Blacks”. This trend, which followed European urban fashion, would be soon reversed.⁴²

By the mid-1800s, new transportation methods began eroding the walking city. The steam ferry, the omnibus, the commuter railroad, the elevated railroad and the cable car slowly changed urban patterns in the American cities and allowed the middle class to escape the city and elect the much quieter and safer suburbs as their residence, whilst maintaining their occupation in the city. All of this was accompanied by a growing population that pressured those who could move out of the city to do so. The presence of means of transportation beside the horse and walking made commuting to and from work much easier.⁴³

⁴² Ibid., pp. 12-19.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 20.



Figure 3. A Colonial era street in Philadelphia's historic core.

The first commuter suburb was Brooklyn. Contrary to the imagination that one may have of commuting to work, namely by bus or train, the first commuting service was actually performed by a steam ferry, which began operating in 1814. This led to the growth of Brooklyn, which would become a small city in its own right. Without leaving New York City, commuter ferry services began operating across the Hudson river, connecting Manhattan with Hoboken and Jersey City. By the 1850s, ferries traveled between Manhattan and Jersey City every 15 minutes. Other examples of ferry commuting include those in the Bay Area of San Francisco, and between Philadelphia and Camden, New Jersey. Nevertheless, no other city developed a network of commuter ferries as New York, which relies on commuter ferries like the Staten Island ferry to this day.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 25-33.



Figure 4. Lower Manhattan seen from the Staten Island Ferry.

In 1829, the first surface public transit system was introduced in the United States: the omnibus. The omnibus was first introduced in New York, and later became popular in other East Coast cities like Philadelphia, Boston and Baltimore, which introduced the omnibus in 1831, 1835 and 1844 respectively. Throughout the years, the amount of omnibuses increased exponentially and contributed to the beginning of traffic congestion in big American cities. While taking the omnibus was definitely more convenient than walking, the ride was not particularly enjoyable. Indeed, the omnibus, which could only transport up to 12 passengers at a time, was slow, poorly ventilated and uncomfortable due to its unpadded benches. Even one newspaper commented that “modern martyrdom may be succinctly described as riding in

a New York omnibus”.⁴⁵ For these reasons, although omnipresent in the major American cities, ridership of the omnibus never skyrocketed.⁴⁶

A major revolution took place with the widespread adoption of the steam engine. Railroad companies expanded their networks of operation further outside of the cities. Trains could transport more passengers and provide an increased level of comfort compared to the omnibus. The first railroad in North America was the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in 1928. From then on, commuter railroads appeared in the major American cities. The New York and Harlem Railroad, which began operations in 1832, was the first one and quickly expanded north. The New York and New Haven Railroad reached New Haven in 1843, and as a consequence of this expansion, the population of Westchester County increased by 75 percent between 1850 and 1860. This goes to show that the outward expansion of commuter railroads fostered urban sprawl and that wherever the train stopped, both commercial establishments and private domiciles were built. Similar commuter services were offered in Philadelphia, Chicago, and Jersey City, which became a train hub connecting passengers from the railroad to the ferry and vice versa, allowing a speedy commute from New Jersey to New York City.⁴⁷

While the trains soon became popular, they encountered strong criticism from some elements of society. First of all, religious ministers were against the companies for running the trains on Sundays. Then farmers complained because the trains were disturbing their peace, bothering their animals and polluting their pristine land. And finally, the general public was sometimes afraid of steam-powered trains, for there had been accidents involving the explosion of locomotives in the early days of the steam engine.⁴⁸ All in all, the train became the most popular means of transportation and soon new cross-country railroads pushed the frontier to reach and connect both coasts.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 33-35.

⁴⁶ In 1850, only 25,000 residents of New York - a little over 3 percent of the entire city's population - used the omnibus on a daily basis.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 35-37.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 38.

The increased ease to commute to and from the city center fostered suburban growth. In the 1840s, the suburbs were not fully distinct from the city. Indeed, they were peripheral towns, extensions of the dominant city. Nevertheless, in the earliest suburbs, the cult of domesticity was formed, from which derived the values of privacy and isolation that have shaped the United States ever since. In the suburbs, a family was no longer exclusively part of a community, but something of its own. Behind the closed doors of each suburban home, a new world began. By 1870, separateness had become essential to the identity of the suburban house. The front yard, devoid of walls so as not to interfere with nature, served the purpose of an invisible barrier between the family and the outside world.⁴⁹

Three main voices had shaped the American feelings towards the suburbs. The first one was Catharine Beecher. She was the daughter of a famous Calvinist preacher and authored the *Treatise on Domestic Economy, For the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*. In this work, Beecher suggested that family life could thrive in a semirural setting and that "implanted in the heart of every true man, is the desire for a home of his own". She advocated in favor of both the physical and social separation of people and saw in the suburbs the perfect way to do so.⁵⁰

Another important voice was that of Andrew Jackson Downing. In his treatise he wrote that he believed "above all things under heaven, in the power and virtue of the individual home". He also wrote that "in the United States nature and domestic life are better than society and manners of towns. Hence all sensible men gladly escape, earlier or later, and partially or wholly, from the turmoil of cities". In addition, he despised the congested way of building cities "as though there was a fearful scarcity of space". He then argued that "the love of country is inseparably connected with love of home. Whatever, therefore, leads men to assemble the comforts and elegancies of life around his habitations, tends to increase local

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 45-60.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 61-63.

attachments, and render domestic life more delightful; thus not only augmenting his own enjoyment but strengthening his patriotism, and making him a better citizen". In his work, *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850), he linked homeownership and citizenship, and stated that the nuclear family was "the best social form" and that "the individual home has a great social value for a people". If a house was placed in the countryside, beauty and order would prosper.⁵¹

Suburban roads were significantly different from city roads. From the earliest days of Colonial America, cities were planned to have a gridiron layout. Philadelphia adopted it in 1682, New York City in 1811, while the District of Columbia, planned in 1791 by Pierre Charles L'Enfant, adopted a series of radial streets over a gridiron layout. The rationale of this system can be seen in the antinaturalistic influence of that time, tied with the myth of the frontier; rectangular, rational urban planning could overcome the topographic hostility of every plot of land in America. Across the country, the adoption of a gridiron standard culminated with the Homestead Act of 1862, which divided each square mile into quarter sections of 160 acres.⁵² On the contrary, curved lines, typical of the American suburbs, symbolized the country. So, early suburban settlements focused on breaking away from the gridiron system to recreate a naturalistic approach to housing and urban planning.

The final argument in favor of early suburban settlement came from Frederick Law Olmsted. The mind behind New York City's Central Park argued in 1868 that "no great town can long exist without great suburbs".⁵³ This gave way to massive investments into suburban development. The possibility to commute from the suburbs to the job radically changed American life forever. At that point, nobody was physically bound to city living. By 1890, suburbs were distinct from the city and, according to the Bureau of the Census, the Western

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 63-66.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 74-75.

⁵³ Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias, The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*, Basic Books, 1987, p. 104.

frontier no longer existed.⁵⁴ The unknown had been conquered, and it was now time to settle the vastness of America via the suburban sprawl.

Frederick Law Olmsted created many of America's oldest suburbs. He saw suburbs as a synthesis of city and country, and not as a mere escape from the former. Olmsted believed that the suburban community was one of "detached dwellings with sylvan surroundings yet supplied with a considerable share of urban conveniences".⁵⁵ Together with Calvert Vaux, he planned 16 suburbs, among which Yonkers in New York City and Brookline in Boston are worth mentioning. The most famous one, however, was Riverside. Located nine miles west of Chicago, Riverside was meticulously planned to have parks and generous lots. The objective was to combine "the conveniences peculiar to the finest modern towns with the domestic advantages of a most charming country". Although the Riverside Improvement Company went bankrupt because of the Panic of 1873, Riverside still remained an example of the so-called "urban compromise" represented by the suburbs.⁵⁶

By the end of the nineteenth century, the landscape of the classic suburb had expanded throughout the United States. The open lawns, the tree-lined streets, the churches and country clubs had become essential to almost every suburb. Houses were set back from the sidewalk to allow every house to have a front yard, which became each family's portion of a larger, suburban park. The culmination of this "lawn culture" is the establishment of the country club, generally accompanied by its golf course. They represent the social boundaries of the suburbs, which at the time were almost exclusively accessible only by the upper classes.⁵⁷

The new suburban settlements were not only for the wealthy. Middle class people could afford modest houses outside of the city, too. What was important was that their

⁵⁴ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, p. 46.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

⁵⁷ Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias*, pp. 145-148.

workplaces would be close to the stops made by the commuter lines. The chance of owning a house made them even more dependent upon their employer. Big corporations like the Pennsylvania Railroad were unafraid that their employers might strike, for they couldn't afford to because they had to pay their mortgage.⁵⁸ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, workers lived both physically and economically attached to their workplace. As the song *Sixteen Tons* says, workers "owe[d] their soul to the company store".

At any rate, the wealthier the family, the furthest they could escape from cities that were each day becoming more polluted, industrialized and dangerous. For better or for worse, the industrial revolution changed the American landscape, and the rich, who had hitherto preferred to remain closer to the business core of the city, were fleeing to the fringes. The neighborhoods they left, the inner city, were occupied by workers who came from across the world in search of a better place to live.

This outward movement was all theorized by the Chicago School of Sociology, which is considered to be the founder of urban geography. To understand the development of American urban geography, it is essential to explore the writings of Ernest Burgess. In 1925, Burgess wrote *The Growth of the City: An Introduction to a Research Project*, in which he outlined the expansion of cities through the concentric zone model. He posed the question of how individuals are incorporated into the life of a city. His writings came one year after the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which established quotas on immigrants to the United States. He not only highlighted the definitions of social problems tied to immigrants and their assimilation, but also the spatial arrangement of the twentieth-century American industrial city. The growth and expansion of cities depended on the organized and disorganized processes of society. The movement was strictly outward, and the conditions improved significantly with each leap. Even the inner city was considered as a temporary residence for

⁵⁸ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, p. 51.

immigrants that were about to discover the opportunities that the United States was about to offer them in terms of spatial and social mobility. Burgess' theories, although similar to those of the melting pot, represent the city as an organism governed by the struggle for existence. The arrival of in-migrants created an unfavorable environment for the wealthier, existing population that felt the need to move outward. Or perhaps the opposite happened, namely the in-migrants moved to an area that was being abandoned by its previous inhabitants. Burgess explains spatial mobility in the city through a series of concentric circles "to designate both the successive zones of urban extension and the types of areas differentiated in the process of expansion".⁵⁹

Burgess based the model on Chicago. The first circle is the radial expansion of the central business district or, in Chicago, the Loop. Surrounding the downtown core, there is typically a transitional zone characterized by gradual change and redevelopment, where commercial activities and light manufacturing industries increasingly expand into formerly residential neighborhoods. Adjacent to this lies an area largely populated by industrial workers and lower-middle-class families who have moved away from deteriorating inner-city districts, yet still prefer to remain within convenient reach of their workplaces. Farther outward extends a more affluent residential belt, distinguished by upscale apartment complexes and exclusive neighborhoods composed mainly of single-family homes with restricted access or higher property values. Beyond these urban residential districts, and often stretching past the official city boundaries, lies the commuter zone: a broad suburban landscape and a network of satellite towns connected to the city center, typically located within a thirty- to sixty-minute journey from the central business district.⁶⁰ The expansion of each zone is detrimental to the next outer zone. Burgess states that no city can perfectly fit

⁵⁹ Ernest Burgess, "The Growth of the City: An Introduction to a Research Project", *The Urban Geography Reader*, edited by Nicholas Fyfe and Judith Kenny, Routledge, 2005, p. 22.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

this model, mainly for topographical reasons. Nevertheless, the trends of the time supported Burgess' thesis.

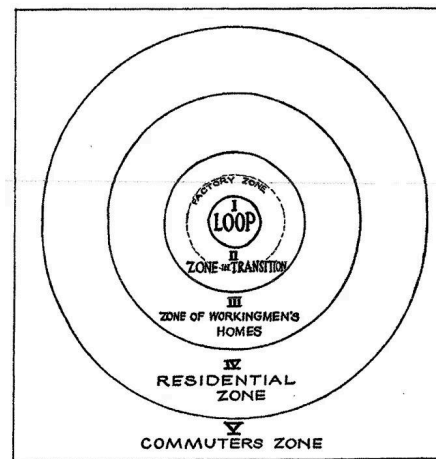


CHART I. The Growth of the City

Figure 5. Burgess' concentric zone model.⁶¹

In the process of urban expansion, a complex dynamic of distribution and redistribution takes place, continuously sorting, relocating, and reorganizing individuals and social groups according to both residence and occupation. This process ultimately produces the characteristic differentiation of the modern cosmopolitan American city into distinct social and spatial areas. Although these urban patterns may vary in minor aspects from one city to another, they generally follow a remarkably similar structural model.

At the center of the city lies the central business district, often accompanied by adjacent streets that historically formed the core of "hobohemia", a crowded and transient environment inhabited by homeless and migratory workers, particularly those moving throughout the American Midwest. Surrounding this commercial nucleus is the so-called zone of deterioration, an area commonly associated with slums and "badlands", where

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 22.

poverty, social marginalization, disease, and criminal activities tend to concentrate. These districts represent the most visible manifestations of urban decay and social exclusion.

Within these deteriorated areas, rooming-house districts emerge as temporary spaces for socially and economically displaced individuals, often described metaphorically as a “purgatory of lost souls.” Nearby, one frequently encounters the Latin Quarter, traditionally inhabited by artists, intellectuals, and politically rebellious groups seeking cultural freedom and alternative lifestyles. At the same time, these overcrowded districts also become centers of immigrant settlement, giving rise to ethnic enclaves such as the ghettos, Little Sicily, Greektown, and Chinatown. Such neighborhoods are particularly significant because they combine the preservation of old-world cultural traditions with the gradual adaptation to American urban and social life.

Adjacent to these immigrant districts develops the so-called Black Belt, characterized by a vibrant yet often unstable social environment shaped by racial segregation and economic inequality. Despite being fundamentally associated with decline and stagnation, the zone of deterioration simultaneously functions as a space of renewal and transformation. Indeed, it is frequently within these marginalized urban environments that missions, settlement houses, artists’ colonies, and radical political centers emerge, all united by the aspiration to imagine and construct a new and improved social order.

The next urban zone is predominantly inhabited by factory and shop workers who, unlike the residents of the deteriorated districts, are generally more skilled, economically stable, and socially ambitious. This area is typically characterized as a zone of secondary immigrant settlement, often populated by second-generation immigrants who have begun the process of social and economic advancement. In many respects, it represents a transitional space between the poverty of the slums and the aspiration toward middle-class stability. It becomes, therefore, the symbolic “region of escape” from the overcrowded immigrant ghetto.

This aspiration is reflected in the term Deutschland - literally “Germany” - which was used both ironically and admiringly to describe neighborhoods located beyond the traditional ghetto. These districts were associated with families attempting to emulate the higher standards of living commonly attributed to successful German-Jewish communities. Yet even the inhabitants of these improved areas continued to look beyond their immediate surroundings, aspiring to more prestigious residential environments characterized by apartment districts, residential hotels, suburban satellite communities, and newly developing urban peripheries. In this sense, urban space reflects a continuous hierarchy of social ambition and mobility.

Such differentiation into natural, economic, and cultural groupings ultimately provides the city with its distinctive form and social character. Urban segregation, while often perceived negatively, also serves an organizational function by assigning both groups and individuals a specific place and role within the broader structure of urban life. On the one hand, segregation may restrict development and interaction in certain directions; on the other, it can foster internal cohesion, strengthen collective identity, and encourage the development of specialized social and cultural traits. Over time, these areas become increasingly differentiated, attracting individuals with similar backgrounds, occupations, or aspirations and reinforcing their own distinctive identities.

A similar process of differentiation can also be observed in the urban division of labor. Immigrants arriving from rural regions of Europe or America frequently possessed few skills that could immediately be applied within the industrial, commercial, or professional economy of the modern city. Nevertheless, significant patterns of occupational specialization gradually emerged among different ethnic groups. These patterns were shaped less by the economic traditions of the immigrants’ countries of origin and more by social circumstances, opportunities, and collective adaptation to urban life. As a result, certain professions became

strongly associated with particular ethnic communities, giving rise to familiar urban figures such as Irish policemen, Greek ice cream vendors, Chinese laundry owners, African American porters, and Belgian janitors. These occupational associations further contributed to the social organization and cultural diversity that defined the modern American city.⁶²

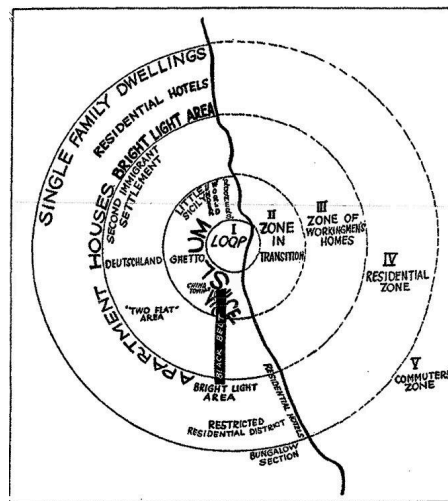


CHART II. Urban Areas

Figure 6. Burgess' concentric zone model applied to Chicago.⁶³

Movement in itself should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence of social change or urban growth. Indeed, movement may simply reflect a repetitive and stable order of actions designed to preserve an existing situation, as occurs in forms of routine or habitual behavior. By contrast, movement becomes socially significant when it represents an adaptive response to new circumstances, stimuli, or environmental conditions. It is this transformative form of movement that can properly be defined as mobility.

Mobility implies not only physical displacement, but also exposure to new experiences, ideas, and forms of stimulation. Such stimulation provokes responses from individuals toward those elements within their environment that appear capable of satisfying

⁶² Ibid., pp. 24-25.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 24.

their desires, ambitions, or personal aspirations. For human beings, as for biological organisms more generally, stimulation constitutes an essential condition for development and growth. However, the effects of stimulation remain constructive only insofar as the individual's response is integrated within a coherent and balanced personality structure. When reactions become fragmented, detached, or uncontrolled by the broader organization of the self, they tend instead toward disorganization and pathological behavior.

For this reason, the pursuit of stimulation merely for its own sake - such as the restless and continuous search for pleasure - can assume destructive characteristics and ultimately resemble forms of vice or moral disorientation. The mobility associated with modern urban life, characterized by an ever-growing quantity and intensity of social stimuli, therefore carries an inherent tendency to generate confusion and moral instability within individuals. An essential component of both collective morality and personal ethical behavior is consistency, particularly the kind of consistency traditionally reinforced through the social control exercised by primary groups such as the family, neighborhood, or close community networks.

Where mobility reaches its highest levels, these traditional forms of primary social control tend to weaken or disappear entirely. This phenomenon becomes especially visible within the zones of deterioration of the modern city, where the breakdown of stable communal structures often gives rise to areas marked by demoralization, promiscuity, social disorder, and vice. Such urban environments illustrate why mobility can be considered one of the most revealing indicators of the city's social condition and internal functioning. In a metaphorical yet meaningful sense, mobility may therefore be understood as the "pulse" of the urban community, reflecting both its vitality and its underlying social tensions.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 26.

When Burgess completed his theories, America was rapidly changing. Moving patterns were evolving thanks to an invention that would profoundly reshape American life: the car. While European car manufacturers aimed at producing cars for the wealthy, American manufacturers, albeit scarce at the onset of the twentieth century, realized the importance of the democratization of the automobile. However, railroads still provided a safer and smoother ride compared to cars, for cities were seldom connected by paved roads, so much so that in 1910 the *Brooklyn Eagle* called automobiling “the last call of the wild”.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, American car manufacturing kept growing, also thanks to the intuition of Henry Ford. Ford, a Michigan farm boy who then moved to Detroit, founded the Ford Motor Company in 1903 and in 1908 he presented the first car for the masses: the Model T. The Model T was easy to operate and could sustain the difficult terrains and road conditions of the time. Ford stated that he would “build a motor car for the great multitude”, and that it would “be large enough for the family, but small enough for the individual to run and care for”. In addition, the Model T would be “constructed of the best materials, by the best men to be hired, after the simplest designs that modern engineering can devise”. But most importantly, it would “be so low in price that no man making a good salary will be unable to own one - and enjoy with his family the blessings of hours of pleasure in God’s great open spaces”.⁶⁶ Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, Ford was able to both increase his employees’ wages and lower the cost of the Model T from \$950 in 1910 to \$290 in 1924. In 1925, 9000 cars were produced daily.⁶⁷ By the time production of the Model T ceased in 1927, over 16 million of them had been produced. American automobile registrations increased from one million in 1913 to ten million in 1923. Kansas had more cars than Germany and France, and Michigan had more cars than the United Kingdom and Ireland. In 1927, around 26 million cars were

⁶⁵ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, pp. 158-159.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

registered in the United States. The car was no longer a luxury, but rather a necessity of the American middle class.⁶⁸

Of course, the increase of registered cars meant that road conditions had to improve. Through a private industry effort to modernize and improve roadways, cities started to substitute cobblestones, which were ideal for horses, with asphalt and concrete, which were on the contrary more favorable for tires. The lobbying from tire manufacturers, parts dealers, oil companies, service station owners and land developers quickly helped turn dilapidated city streets into state-of-the-art, smooth roads. Wide thoroughfares and express parkways, like those that radiated from Downtown Detroit, began making their appearance throughout the United States. The Greater New York City area witnessed the first expressways, namely the Long Island Motor Parkway, the Hutchinson River Parkway, the Saw Mill River Parkway and the Cross County Parkway. In 1929, New Jersey started operating an expressway from Jersey City to Elizabeth. In 1926, the bridge between Philadelphia and Camden was inaugurated, and in 1933 the George Washington Bridge connected New York City and New Jersey. In 1921, the Federal Road Act designated 200,000 miles of primary roads which could benefit from federal funding. On the other hand, gasoline taxes, which had been enacted by every state in the Union by 1929, provided state revenues to boost road-building programs.⁶⁹ Roads were becoming a place of movement and not of social interaction. In their relentless pursuit of modernity through increased mobility, American urban populations ultimately contributed to the destruction of the traditional living environments that had characterized nineteenth-century neighborhoods. Public gathering spaces, once designed to encourage social interaction and community life, were progressively transformed into congested traffic corridors. Similarly, playgrounds and recreational areas were replaced by large motorways,

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 162-163.

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 165-167.

while local commercial streets increasingly evolved into extended parking areas primarily designed to accommodate automobiles rather than pedestrians.⁷⁰

The rise of the car made public transportation unprofitable and underused. The amount of successful streetcars suburbs rapidly declined. With lower ridership and increased operational costs, many companies were forced to declare bankruptcy. This was the case of the Boston Elevated Railroad, which did so in 1918. Meanwhile, General Motors pushed for the conversion of streetcars into buses. This forced conversion was pushed by prominent figures like New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Robert Moses. Moses, who was first appointed Long Island Parks commissioner in 1924 and then head of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, famously built bridges and overpasses with a certain clearance so as to prevent buses from being able to go under them. He despised public transport and never took it into account while planning his projects, even though rail lines proved to be more efficient in terms of how many people could travel per hour. Namely, while one lane of highway can accommodate 2500 cars per hour, one rail line can accommodate up to 40,000 passengers per hour.⁷¹

These urban planning choices profoundly altered the social and physical structure of American cities. By prioritizing automobile circulation and infrastructural expansion over communal and human-centered spaces, many of the older urban neighborhoods gradually lost their original functions, identities, and social cohesion. As a consequence, large portions of urban America's historic districts became effectively obsolete, unable to adapt to the new spatial and economic priorities imposed by modern transportation systems and postwar urban development.

The *roaring twenties* were a decade of rapid suburbanization. While in 1920 only 46 percent of American families were homeowners, during the 1920s almost one million houses

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 167-168.

⁷¹ James Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere*, pp. 97-100.

a year were built and new suburbs grew at the edge of every major American city. For example, the Detroit suburb of Grosse Pointe grew by 725 percent in a decade, while Elmwood Park, a suburb of Chicago, did so by 717 percent. Almost all suburban housing was now dependent upon the automobile. The car was thus seen as a liberating force by architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and LeCorbusier, while Henry Ford stated that one ought to leave the city to solve his problems.⁷²

One example of a successful suburb is Kansas City's Country Club District. Planned by Clyde Nichols in the southwest side of the Midwestern city, the Country Club District would ultimately comprise over 6000 homes and 160 apartment buildings, housing over 35,000 people. The district, which promised "spacious grounds for permanently protected homes, surrounded with ample space for air and sunshine", followed three rules. Firstly, there were no angles or gridiron streets. Secondly, no trees were cut down. Lastly, there was no disregard for the natural contours of the land. The mandatory participation in the Homeowners Association and the steep price of his dwellings made the Country Club District very upscale and selective.⁷³

The automotive suburb was different from the commuter suburb. The differences lay in the overall pattern of settlement, the length and direction of the journey to work, the deconcentration of employment and the new forms of low-density, residential architecture. While streetcar suburbs were built solely in relation to their closeness to a streetcar or railroad stop, the car allowed commuters to travel perpendicularly to the commuter lines, thus allowing the construction of appealing housing despite its distance from the rail transportation corridors. The most significant characteristic of the automobile suburb was its substantially lower population density and its much larger average lot size when compared with any previous form of urban development. The widespread adoption of the automobile

⁷² Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, pp. 174-177.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178.

radically transformed the spatial organization of cities by opening vast new areas of land for residential expansion, far beyond the limits imposed by traditional public transportation systems. Unlike neighborhoods dependent on streetcars or rail networks, suburban areas accessible primarily by private automobiles benefited from a much greater availability of land, which consequently reduced the cost of real estate per square foot. As a result of this increased availability of inexpensive developable land, the average size of residential building lots expanded considerably. In traditional streetcar suburbs, lot sizes generally averaged around 3,000 square feet, whereas in automobile-oriented suburbs they increased to approximately 5,000 square feet. At the same time, residential density followed the opposite trend, declining significantly as suburban expansion accelerated. Neighborhoods originally developed around trolley and streetcar systems often reached densities of roughly 20,000 inhabitants per square mile, while automobile-dependent suburban districts typically exhibited population densities nearly half that figure.⁷⁴

This transformation demonstrates the extent to which transportation technology influenced the physical structure of modern urban environments. Indeed, the residential density of many contemporary neighborhoods continues to reflect the transportation systems that shaped their initial development. Areas historically designed around public transit tend to remain more compact and densely populated, whereas those developed during the rise of the automobile are generally characterized by greater spatial dispersion, lower density, and a stronger dependence on private vehicles. This is also reflected by the decrease in population and its density in some wealthy urban neighbourhoods. In Williamsburg, Brooklyn, the population density in the 1920s decreased from 120 people per acre to 90, while the Lower East Side, which contained 398,000 people in 1910, saw its population gradually decrease to “just” 147,000 in 1940.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 184.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 185.

Not even the Great Depression slowed down the rise of the automobile. Vehicle registration continued to increase and people were more willing to leave their homes than to give up the car. Indeed, the latter allowed them to move around the country in search for a better life, as depicted in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the famous novel of John Steinbeck. In 1933, at the end of Herbert Hoovers' presidency, the President's Committee on Recent Social Trends in the United States declared that "the automobile has become a dominant influence in the life of the individual, and he, in a very real sense, has become dependent on it".⁷⁶

Nevertheless, the Great Depression did lay down the foundation to create two important agencies. Faced with massive unemployment and homelessness, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created, as part of the New Deal legislation, the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) in 1933 and the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) in 1934. The Home Owners Loan Corporation helped protect the small homeowner from the risk of foreclosure. A firm believer that "a nation of homeowners is unconquerable", President Roosevelt urged Congress to pass legislation that would allow homeowners to refinance their mortgages and even grant low-interest loans to former homeowners who were forced to sell their homes. The HOLC received bipartisan support. Indeed, even the Republican members of Congress, who were firmly opposed to government intervention in business, backed the legislation, for they believed that if the government did not help the owners pay their mortgages, Washington would have really had to intervene massively in the economy to save their homes and many more businesses. About 40 percent of eligible Americans applied to receive assistance from the HOLC.⁷⁷

The Home Owners Loan Corporation had lasting effects on the American housing market. Indeed, it introduced and perfected the concept of a long-term, self-amortizing mortgage with uniform payments spread over the life of the debt. In the nineteenth century,

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 187.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 195-196.

mortgages were not common because wealthy families could pay the full price upfront. During the 1910s and 1920s, mortgages became fairly more common but usually had a shorter lifespan and a variable interest rate depending on when the mortgage was renewed.⁷⁸

In addition, perhaps the most important feature introduced by the HOLC was the systematization of appraisal methods. HOLC appraisers divided cities into neighborhoods and censused the inhabitants based on their occupation, income and ethnicity, as well as the age, construction type, price range, demand and state of repair of their dwelling. The HOLC therefore contributed to the establishment of red lining. As a matter of fact, neighborhoods were divided into four categories of quality, namely First (A), Second (B), Third (C) and Fourth (D), respectively indicated with the color green, blue, yellow and red. The first grade areas were described as new, homogeneous, and “in demand [...] in times good and bad”. The second grade was represented by areas that were still deemed desirable and stable in demand, although they had reached their peak. The third grade neighborhoods were described as “definitely declining”. Finally, the fourth grade neighborhoods were described as areas “in which the things taking place in C areas have already happened”. The appraisals made by HOLC agents were in nature both ecological and socioeconomic. They understood that the city was dynamic, and that any area of the city was bound to decline partly because of the increasing age of the buildings and partly because of the filtering down of houses to families of ever lower income. Therefore, neighborhoods inhabited by African Americans and other “undesirables” were systematically rated as D and circled in red, thus establishing the term and practice of redlining.⁷⁹

The data collected by HOLC agents was translated into “Residential Security Maps”. Kenneth Jackson reports the results of St. Louis’ Residential Security Map from the 1930s and 1940s. He noted that affluent suburbs were given the highest ratings. An example thereof

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 196-197.

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 197-198.

is Ladue, where “capitalists and other wealthy” people lived and there was not “a single foreigner or negro”. On the opposite side of the spectrum was the neighborhood of Lincoln Terrace. Originally an unsuccessful development for white middle-class families, Lincoln Terrace developed into an African American neighborhood. Despite the quality of the housing itself, this district obtained the lowest possible score, for the houses had “little to no value [...], having suffered a tremendous decline in values due to the colored element now controlling the district”. In 1941, the Federal Home Loan Bank Board stated that the increasing presence of African Americans was creating problems in the maintenance of real estate values.⁸⁰

Another important agency is the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), created after the adoption of the National Housing Act of 1934. The purpose of the FHA was to partner with the HOLC to stabilize mortgages and reduce foreclosures, and to implement a nationwide instrument to boost both employment and standard minimum requirements for home construction. These standards were written and objective, and they were enforced by an on-site inspection. Therefore, the FHA would insure the mortgage which, because of the government’s guarantee, usually had a lower interest rate. Home sales quickly increased from 93,000 in 1933 to over 619,000 in 1941. FHA backed loans, with their low interest rate and down payments, made it cheaper to buy than to rent. In Dumont, New Jersey, one resident stated that he was paying \$50 per month to rent his apartment in New York City, whereas in suburban New Jersey his mortgage payment only amounted to \$29 per month, in addition to the prospect of eventually owning a house.⁸¹

The FHA fueled the beginning of the suburban dream. This is because it was involuntarily removing middle class families from the inner city to relocate them in the fringes of cities. The legislation, in full accordance with the antiurban bias of American life,

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 199-201.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 203-206.

avored the construction of single-family developments compared to multi-family complexes, which were more typical in the cities. In addition, the FHA made it easier to purchase a new home compared to renovating an older one, because the loans for the latter would have been shorter and smaller. Finally, an “unbiased professional estimate” was necessary for all loan guarantees. Mortgage amounts were thus related to the appraised value of a property, which was determined by factors such as the value of the property, as well as the rating of the borrower and of the neighborhood. The appraisal helped ensure that at any time of the loan the value of the property would exceed the amount of the outstanding debt. The lower the valuation, the lower the amount of FHA-backed loans.⁸²

For this purpose, eight criteria were established. These were the relative economic stability (40 percent), the protection from adverse influences (20 percent), the freedom from special hazards (5 percent), the adequacy of civic, social, and commercial centers (5 percent), the adequacy of transportation (10 percent), the sufficiency of utilities and conveniences (5 percent), the level of taxes and special assessments (5 percent), and the appeal (10 percent). It is clear that the first two criteria outweigh the remaining six. The most undesirable features - namely those which could be avoided in the suburbs - were crowded neighborhoods with older properties which accelerate the transition to a lower class occupancy, smoke and odor, and multipurpose dwellings, doubling as store, office or rental. The FHA also defined size requirements for the lots and houses themselves, as well as the setback from the streets and the distance from neighboring homes. Moreover, the FHA argued that “if a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes”, with much concern towards “inharmonious racial or nationality groups”. The FHA also recommended “subdivision regulations and suitable restrictive covenants [...] superior to any mortgage”. Such covenants would be legal until the 1948

⁸² Ibid., pp. 206-207.

Shelley v. Kramer Supreme Court ruling. The FHA created reports and maps to track the presence of African Americans, the main targets of redlining and the main cause of a neighborhood's disgrace, as per the federal government's agencies. Columbia University professor Charles Abrams once wrote that "from its inception the FHA set itself up as the protector of the all white neighborhood" and that "it sent its agents into the field to keep Negroes and other minorities from buying houses in white neighborhoods".⁸³

These notions have been theoretically systematized in the 1930s by Homer Hoyt of the University of Chicago. In his study titled *The Structure and Growth of Residential Neighborhoods in American Cities*, Hoyt argues that high-class residential neighborhoods of a city follow a definite path determined by the "theory of neighborhood change". According to the sector theory of urban development, neighborhoods tend to evolve along specific geographical corridors that radiate outward from the city center. Although no city perfectly follows this pattern, American urban growth has often displayed a tendency for residential areas to expand along distinct sectors, with new development generally reproducing the social and economic characteristics already established within that corridor. As a result, sectors that initially attract affluent residents tend to remain desirable over time, while those that develop as lower-income areas frequently retain that status as the city expands.

This process highlights the crucial role of wealth in shaping urban and suburban growth. High-income residential districts are particularly influential because they often determine the direction of future development. The most affluent households establish themselves in what may be described as the city's "high-rent area", creating a focal point of prestige and desirability. As wealthier residents seek larger homes, better environments, and improved living conditions, this high-rent district gradually moves outward from the urban

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 208-218.

core. New housing is constructed at the expanding edge of these affluent sectors, while the neighborhoods left behind begin a process of social succession.

This mechanism generates a continuous filtering process. As upper-income groups relocate to newer and more exclusive residential areas, their former homes become occupied by middle-income households, which are in turn succeeded by groups with fewer economic resources. Consequently, urban neighborhoods experience constant social transformation, with housing stock gradually passing down the socioeconomic hierarchy. The city thus develops through a combination of outward suburban expansion and internal residential succession.

Historical examples from numerous American cities illustrate this pattern. In cities such as New York, Chicago, Richmond, Minneapolis, Seattle, and Charleston, West Virginia, affluent residential districts consistently migrated away from the city center along preferred development corridors. In some cases, wealthy residents established entirely new suburban communities on the urban fringe, anticipating later suburbanization. Nevertheless, even when these apparent “jumps” occurred, they generally followed the broader trajectory of elite residential expansion.

The sector theory therefore suggests that urban growth is driven not only by population increase but also by the residential mobility of affluent groups. Their search for increasingly desirable locations shapes the spatial development of the city, while the neighborhoods they abandon undergo a gradual filtering process that redistributes housing among progressively less affluent social groups. This dynamic became one of the defining characteristics of American urban and suburban development throughout the twentieth century.

The outward expansion of affluent residential neighborhoods is a fundamental feature of American urban development. High-income households rarely return to older residences

that they have previously abandoned, as these properties are often perceived as outdated or no longer consistent with their social and economic aspirations. At the same time, opportunities for movement within the existing urban fabric are limited, since surrounding districts are typically occupied by middle-income groups, while no higher-status residential areas exist from which wealthier residents can inherit housing. Consequently, affluent households tend to seek newly developed properties on previously undeveloped land.

This dynamic reinforces a continuous process of suburban expansion. New high-status residential areas are generally established on vacant land located beyond the existing urban edge, often in the same sector where affluent development has historically occurred. Anticipating future demand from upper-income residents, developers frequently reserve these areas for exclusive residential use, while land speculation raises property values beyond the reach of lower- and middle-income groups. As a result, the spatial growth of wealthy neighborhoods follows a relatively predictable outward trajectory.

The movement of affluent residents has important consequences for the rest of the urban structure. As upper-income households relocate to newly developed suburban districts, the housing they leave behind becomes available to less affluent groups, generating the filtering process through which neighborhoods are progressively reoccupied by residents with lower incomes. Urban change therefore emerges from the interaction between the suburbanization of wealth and the gradual social succession occurring within older residential areas. A partial exception to this pattern can be found in the development of luxury apartment districts within established urban neighborhoods, where affluent residents occasionally remain in or return to central locations without occupying traditional single-family housing.⁸⁴

In the cities examined, affluent residential districts typically originated close to the central retail and business district, where higher-income groups worked and where residential

⁸⁴ Homer Hoyt, "The Structure and Growth of Residential Neighborhoods in American Cities", *The Urban Geography Reader*, edited by Nicholas Fyfe and Judith Kenny, Routledge, 2005, pp. 29-31.

areas were most distant from industrial and warehouse zones. Over time, however, these neighborhoods consistently shifted outward, and the direction of their expansion followed a number of recurring patterns that reveal the close relationship between wealth, urban growth, and suburbanization.

First, high-income residential development tended to advance along established transportation corridors or toward emerging commercial and residential centers. Once a prestigious district became established, subsequent growth generally followed the same route, reinforcing the sectoral pattern of urban expansion. Transportation infrastructure therefore played a crucial role in guiding the movement of affluent households toward new residential frontiers.

Second, wealthy residents were strongly attracted to locations offering environmental advantages. High-grade neighborhoods frequently migrated toward elevated ground, away from flood-prone areas, industrial pollution, and other undesirable urban conditions. Waterfront locations also proved highly attractive, provided they were not occupied by industrial activities. Access to scenic views, recreational opportunities, cleaner air, and natural amenities increased the desirability of these areas and encouraged affluent residential development along rivers, lakes, bays, and coastlines.

Third, affluent neighborhoods tended to grow toward areas offering opportunities for continued expansion. Open countryside, country clubs, golf courses, and large estates exerted a powerful attraction because they promised both exclusivity and room for future development. Wealthy households generally avoided sectors constrained by natural barriers or by fully developed urban districts, preferring locations where suburban growth could continue over time.

Fourth, high-income residential districts often expanded toward the homes of political, economic, and social elites. The residences of influential individuals served as focal

points that attracted other affluent households, creating prestigious enclaves whose reputation encouraged further development in the same direction. Once established, these concentrations of wealth tended to reinforce their own growth through the social prestige associated with the area.

Fifth, the movement of commercial and business activities also contributed to shaping residential patterns. Although offices, banks, and retail establishments generally followed rather than initiated the movement of affluent residents, their relocation frequently strengthened existing trends by increasing accessibility and convenience. In this way, commercial expansion and high-grade residential growth became mutually reinforcing processes.

Sixth, affluent residential districts consistently developed along the fastest and most efficient transportation routes available. Major roads, railways, commuter lines, and other rapid transit systems enabled upper-income households to reside at increasing distances from the urban core while maintaining access to employment and commercial centers. Improvements in transportation therefore facilitated the continuous outward movement of wealth and accelerated suburban expansion.

Seventh, once a direction of affluent residential growth had become established, it tended to persist for remarkably long periods. In many American cities, high-rent neighborhoods expanded along the same corridors for decades and sometimes for more than a century. Successive generations of wealthy residents settled progressively farther from the city center while maintaining the original trajectory of development. This continuity helped create enduring sectoral patterns of urban growth and reinforced the long-term outward migration of affluent populations.

Eighth, a limited exception to this outward movement could be found in the development of luxury apartment districts near central business areas. In certain large

metropolitan centers, wealthy households sought prestigious, high-density residential environments close to offices and commercial activities. Because luxury apartment buildings generated high returns and made intensive use of valuable land, developers could replace older structures and create exclusive enclaves even within declining or lower-income neighborhoods. These developments represented not a return to traditional residential patterns but rather a specialized form of urban redevelopment that produced a localized renaissance within older districts.

Ninth, real estate developers could influence, although rarely reverse, the direction of affluent residential growth. While market forces and existing patterns generally determined the broader trajectory of expansion, developers were often able to accelerate or channel growth toward particular locations. Through planned communities, restrictive covenants, architectural controls, and coordinated development strategies, they created highly desirable residential districts that attracted affluent households. These projects succeeded not because they altered the fundamental direction of growth, but because they capitalized on areas already situated within the path of elite suburban expansion, transforming them into prestigious residential destinations.

Taken together, these factors illustrate how the spatial development of American cities was shaped by the continual outward movement of wealth. Affluent households repeatedly sought new locations offering greater prestige, accessibility, environmental quality, and opportunities for expansion. As they relocated to newly developed districts on the urban fringe, the neighborhoods they left behind were gradually occupied by successively less affluent groups. The result was a dual process of suburban expansion and residential filtering that became one of the defining characteristics of American urban development.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 31-33.

As a consequence of these various forces, affluent residential districts typically became concentrated within a specific sector of the city and continued to expand outward along that same corridor. Once a pattern of development had been established, it proved difficult to alter. As high-income neighborhoods advanced toward the urban periphery, middle- and lower-income districts expanded as well, occupying adjacent land and reinforcing the social geography of the city. Over time, these surrounding areas acquired increasingly stable socioeconomic identities, making it costly and often impractical for affluent residential development to shift into a different sector. While isolated low-quality settlements could occasionally be displaced by prestigious developments, established working- and middle-class neighborhoods generally represented a significant barrier to such expansion. Consequently, as cities matured, the range of possible directions for elite residential growth became progressively more limited.

The rise of the automobile, however, substantially reduced these constraints. By dramatically extending the radius of urban settlement, automobile transportation opened vast new areas of land for residential development. Affluent neighborhoods no longer needed to compete for scarce land within the existing urban fabric; instead, they could continue their outward movement into previously undeveloped territory. This process strengthened the tendency for wealth to migrate toward the suburban fringe while simultaneously leaving behind a succession of older neighborhoods to be occupied by progressively less affluent residents.

The historical form of affluent residential development also evolved alongside these broader changes. During the late nineteenth century, high-status neighborhoods were often organized according to what might be described as an axial pattern. Prestigious residences lined broad avenues that connected directly to the central business district, creating linear corridors of wealth and social visibility. These boulevards served not only as transportation

routes but also as important social spaces, symbolizing status and facilitating interaction among urban elites. Fashionable residential districts expanded outward along these avenues, while lower-income neighborhoods often remained immediately adjacent to them.

The growth of automobile ownership gradually rendered this model obsolete. As major avenues became heavily trafficked thoroughfares, they lost many of the qualities that had once made them desirable residential environments. Increased noise, congestion, and through-traffic reduced their attractiveness for affluent households, who increasingly sought privacy, exclusivity, and separation from the growing urban masses. Rather than occupying prominent homes along major streets, wealthy residents began moving into secluded residential enclaves characterized by curving roads, landscaped environments, and limited public access.

This transformation marked an important shift in the spatial organization of wealth. The new affluent suburb was no longer a narrow corridor extending from the city center but a broader residential district, often planned as a self-contained community. These developments were frequently located along the same general direction as earlier elite neighborhoods, preserving the established sector of growth while adapting it to new residential preferences. As a result, the pattern of affluent expansion evolved from the linear form of the nineteenth-century boulevard to the wider, fan-shaped suburban sectors characteristic of the automobile age.

Although traces of the older axial model survived in certain waterfront developments, the automobile fundamentally reshaped the geography of affluent residential growth. Access to distant wooded landscapes, hillsides, and other previously inaccessible locations enabled wealthy households to establish exclusive suburban communities far beyond the traditional limits of the city. In doing so, the automobile reinforced the long-term tendency for wealth to

move outward while accelerating the filtering process through which older urban neighborhoods were continuously reoccupied by less affluent social groups.

The fashionable suburban town represented one of the earliest and most enduring forms of affluent residential development in the United States. Established even before the Civil War, many prestigious suburban communities maintained their social status over time while continuing to expand. During the twentieth century, however, a new form of elite residential space emerged: the luxury apartment district. As wealthy households increasingly abandoned large urban townhouses and as high-income single-family neighborhoods moved farther from the city center, some affluent residents sought a compromise between suburban comfort and proximity to business activities. Luxury apartment developments near central districts fulfilled this demand, offering convenience without the burdens associated with maintaining large residences and domestic staff.

The residential patterns of middle-income groups were closely tied to those of the wealthy. Intermediate-income households generally settled in sectors adjacent to high-status neighborhoods, seeking access to newer housing and modern amenities at more affordable prices. As affluent residents moved outward, middle-class districts expanded in the same direction, occupying areas immediately behind the advancing frontier of elite residential growth.



Figure 7. Aerial view of Philadelphia.

Lower-income groups followed a different trajectory. Their housing opportunities were largely determined by the filtering process generated by the movement of wealth toward the suburbs. As upper- and middle-income residents abandoned older housing stock, lower-income households occupied these increasingly depreciated dwellings. Others settled on the urban fringe in inexpensive and often poorly serviced housing. Consequently, low-income districts tended either to occupy the oldest parts of the city or to emerge in peripheral areas characterized by limited infrastructure and lower land values.

Ethnic and racial groups also participated in these processes of residential succession. Historically, new immigrant populations concentrated in the oldest and least expensive neighborhoods near central business districts. As immigrant communities achieved greater economic stability, they gradually moved outward, while newly arriving groups occupied the housing they left behind. Although the decline of mass European immigration after the First World War slowed this particular pattern, similar dynamics continued through the migration of African Americans from the South to northern cities. These demographic shifts contributed to the reconfiguration of many urban neighborhoods, often accelerating changes already underway as older residential areas lost value and desirability.

Taken together, these developments reveal the fundamentally dynamic nature of the American city. Neighborhoods were constantly reshaped by a combination of outward suburban expansion and internal residential succession. As housing aged, physical deterioration and functional obsolescence gradually reduced its attractiveness. Families moved away, maintenance costs increased, and once-desirable neighborhoods became less competitive compared with newer developments on the urban fringe. Over time, these areas

were occupied by residents with fewer economic resources, leading to a progressive decline in socioeconomic status.

The continual movement of affluent households toward newer suburban environments therefore set in motion a broader process of neighborhood transformation. Wealth generated expansion at the metropolitan periphery, while older urban districts underwent a gradual filtering process through which housing passed from one social group to another. The interaction between these forces produced a constantly changing urban landscape in which both the physical structure of neighborhoods and their social composition were subject to continuous redefinition.⁸⁶

The effects of urban growth and residential succession varied according to the type of neighborhood involved. At the upper end of the housing market, affluent residential districts were often particularly vulnerable to obsolescence. Large mansions designed for wealthy families gradually lost their appeal as residential preferences changed and affluent households moved toward newer suburban locations. Because these properties were too expensive for middle-income households to purchase and maintain, they could not easily participate in the normal filtering process. Instead, many were converted to alternative uses such as boarding houses, offices, clubs, or commercial facilities, often accelerating the decline of the surrounding neighborhood. As a result, some of the most prestigious residential districts experienced significant losses in value once they ceased to attract wealthy residents.

Intermediate-income neighborhoods followed a different trajectory. Houses designed for ordinary families could be passed from one income group to another as they aged, allowing the filtering process to occur gradually and with relatively limited disruption. Although these properties generally declined in value as they became older and less fashionable, they continued to serve their original residential function. Because there was

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 34-35.

always a slightly less affluent group willing to occupy them, middle-class neighborhoods tended to display greater long-term stability than either the wealthiest or the poorest districts.

At the lower end of the housing market, conditions were often more precarious. Older and lower-quality housing was occupied by households with the fewest economic resources, resulting in higher vacancy rates, greater maintenance problems, and more frequent demolition of deteriorated structures. Historically, these districts had often served as entry points for new immigrant populations. As residents improved their economic circumstances and moved into better housing, the oldest and least desirable dwellings were either abandoned, demolished, or left vacant. Consequently, the poorest housing stock occupied an increasingly marginal position within the urban landscape.

These patterns illustrate how suburban expansion generated continuous change throughout the city. The construction of new residential developments on the urban fringe, made possible by improved transportation systems, encouraged households at every income level to seek newer and more attractive housing. As affluent families moved outward, middle-income households occupied the homes they left behind, while lower-income groups moved into increasingly older and less desirable dwellings. The oldest housing stock was eventually abandoned or removed from the market altogether.

In this way, every new wave of residential construction contributed to a broader process of neighborhood transformation. Newly built housing, equipped with modern amenities and located in expanding suburban districts, increased competition for existing neighborhoods and reduced the relative attractiveness of older residential areas. Urban growth therefore operated through a continuous cycle of outward expansion and downward filtering, in which rising prosperity at the metropolitan edge simultaneously generated the gradual decline and social succession of older neighborhoods closer to the urban core.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 36.

It is clear that the practices by the HOLC and the FHA which have been codified by Hoyt have brought to the surface the obvious issue of racism in America by stating it plainly. Of course, racial discrimination in housing was not invented by the HOLC or red lining, but is the product of centuries of discrimination, racism and segregation. Residential racial segregation implemented through government action constitutes a violation of the United States Constitution and the rights guaranteed by its amendments. The Fifth Amendment, drafted by the Founding Fathers, prohibits the federal government from treating citizens unfairly. The Thirteenth Amendment, adopted immediately after the Civil War, abolished slavery and, more broadly, sought to prevent the continued treatment of African Americans as second-class citizens. The Fourteenth Amendment, also ratified in the post-Civil War period, prohibits states and local governments from denying individuals equal protection under the law or subjecting them to unequal treatment.⁸⁸

The relevance of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments to government-sponsored residential segregation is relatively straightforward. The exclusion of African Americans from housing subsidies and other benefits that were widely available to white citizens clearly constituted discriminatory treatment and, given its systematic nature, represented a serious constitutional violation. Less immediately apparent, however, is the connection between residential segregation and the Thirteenth Amendment. The Thirteenth Amendment is often understood primarily as the constitutional provision that abolished slavery. While Section 1 formally prohibited slavery and involuntary servitude, Section 2 granted Congress the authority to enforce this prohibition through appropriate legislation. In 1866, Congress exercised this authority by passing a Civil Rights Act aimed at eliminating practices that perpetuated the social and legal conditions associated with slavery. Among the prohibited practices was racial discrimination in housing, which lawmakers regarded as one of the

⁸⁸ Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law. A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017, p. viii.

enduring “badges and incidents” of slavery that continued to subordinate African Americans within society.⁸⁹

In 1883, however, the Supreme Court rejected this broad interpretation of congressional enforcement powers under the Thirteenth Amendment. Although the Court acknowledged that Section 2 authorized Congress to enact legislation necessary to eliminate the lingering consequences of slavery, it refused to recognize exclusion from housing markets as one of the badges or incidents of slavery. As a result, many of the protections established by the Civil Rights Act were effectively undermined and remained largely unenforced for decades. Consequently, discriminatory housing practices persisted throughout much of the following century, contributing significantly to the maintenance and institutionalization of racial segregation in the United States.⁹⁰

African Americans were often patronized and discriminated against. An official from the Richmond Housing Authority in the city of Richmond, California, asserted that “Negroes from the South would rather be by themselves”. In addition, when the Richmond suburb of Rollingwood was developed, the developer had to promise that none of the 700 units would be sold to African Americans in order to receive federal funds. The local Ford plant also fostered employment segregation by stating that “no Mexican or Black workers” were wanted.⁹¹

Even the New Deal initiatives segregated the African American population. Indeed, near the headquarters of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in Norris, Tennessee, a model village was developed to house the local workers. African American workers in the TVA projects could not live there and were forced to live in run-down barracks at the edge of town. An official even stated that they were segregated because “Negroes do not fit into the program”. The Civilian Conservation Corps workcamps, aimed at boosting employment for

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. viii-ix.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. ix.

⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 4-6.

young adults, were not only segregated in the South, but in the North as well. When the Public Works Administration (PWA) was created in 1933, its director was Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, who had been president of the Chicago chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Despite the majority of the PWA developments being aimed at whites, Ickes pushed for the allocation of public housing to African Americans who, like working-class white families, were suffering the most from the housing shortage caused by the Great Depression. He created the “neighborhood composition rule”. This meant that PWA developments were to reflect the previous racial composition of the neighborhood. This meant that developments in historically Black neighborhoods were to be inhabited by African Americans only, whereas neighborhoods which had hitherto been inhabited by Whites ought to remain white. Only already integrated neighborhoods could house both Blacks and Whites. Sometimes, however, the PWA segregated neighborhoods that were not segregated before, often allocating White housing *in lieu* of mixed or Black developments. For example, the Techwood Homes in Atlanta, which opened in 1935 as the first PWA development, emerged from the ashes of a low-income, integrated neighborhood called the Flats. Contrary to the Flats, the Techwood homes were built for Whites only. In Cleveland’s Central neighborhood, where White immigrants from Europe shared the tenements with African Americans, the PWA decided to create two separate developments, one for Whites and one for Blacks, thus segregating a formerly integrated neighborhood. While the Whites-only project included green spaces and playgrounds, the Black-only project was limited to housing. More often than not, PWA projects for African Americans were located in low income areas. While direct federal funding through the PWA ended in 1937, local authorities were established and they received funding by the newly established United States Housing Authority (USHA). The USHA followed similar guidelines of “racial homogeneity” as did the PWA. It indeed stated that it

was “undesirable to have projects for white families in areas now occupied by Negroes” and that “the aim of the authority should be the preservation rather than the disruption of community social structures which best fit the desires of the groups concerned”. By reading between the lines, one can very well imagine that the interest of the White population was to be well separated by African Americans and to obtain the best possible public housing. The federal government and its agencies can not be fully blamed for the segregation of African Americans, but they surely contributed to it.⁹²



Figures 8 and 9. Philadelphia's inner city seen from the train.

Many cities had also adopted zoning regulations, aimed at preventing African Americans from purchasing a house in a White neighborhood. In 1910, Baltimore adopted an ordinance prohibiting African Americans from buying homes on blocks where African Americans were the majority. Although the ordinance worked both ways, it is clear that the goal was not to prevent Whites from buying in Black neighborhoods. This was the first in the country, and its creator, a lawyer named Milton Dashiell argued that “ordinarily, the negro

⁹² Ibid., pp. 18-24.

loves to gather to himself, for he is very gregarious and sociable in his nature. But those who have risen somewhat above their fellows appear to have an intense desire to leave them behind, to disown them, as it were, and get close to the company of white people as circumstances will permit them". Issues arose in integrated neighborhoods. For instance, judges had to determine whether an African American individual could legally purchase a home on a block where the population was evenly divided between white and Black residents. In another case, a white homeowner temporarily vacated his property while renovations were being carried out. Upon completion of the repairs, however, he was prohibited from returning because the racial composition of the block had changed and was now considered majority Black. In another instance, an African American pastor leading a predominantly African American congregation raised concerns with the city administration, noting that because the church was located on a predominantly white block, any future African American successor would be legally prevented from residing in the church parsonage. These practical difficulties exposed the limitations and inconsistencies of the ordinance, making its enforcement increasingly problematic. As a consequence, the regulation was eventually amended so that its provisions applied only to blocks that were entirely occupied by either white or Black residents. Mixed or integrated blocks were excluded from the ordinance's scope, thereby allowing Baltimore's racially diverse neighborhoods to remain unaffected by the zoning restrictions.⁹³

Many other cities in the South adopted similar restrictions. Atlanta, Birmingham, Charleston, Dallas, New Orleans, St. Louis are just some examples of cities where zoning regulations intended to keep neighborhoods ethnically homogeneous were put in place.

To conclude this chapter, it seems clear that suburbanization and urban sprawl, although not immediate, have been deeply embedded in the American spirit from the earliest

⁹³ Ibid., pp. 44-45.

days of the settlement of the North American continent. Those who could move out of the city did so as soon as they could and went the furthest they could go given the means of transportation available, be it the horse, the streetcar or the automobile.

The housing stock they left behind did not go unused. It was progressively filtered down to lower and lower classes. The massive migratory waves provided a constant demand, almost always willing to accept any kind of housing. Often forced to live in tenements, migrants and working-class Americans dreamed of being able to live in houses in which the middle class lived, which in turn was willing to leave said houses to move to a wealthier area. This repetitive process continues infinitely, for both available land and deeper pockets were always available. Nevertheless, what really helped foster massive suburbanization was not the invisible hand of the economy, but rather the effects of the government help that began during the Great Depression.

Chapter 2: The Business of the American Dream

The end of both the Great Depression and World War II accelerated the creation of Suburbia. The economic uncertainty of the past 15 years reinvigorated the longing for the pursuit of the American Dream, materially conceived as owning a home in the Suburbs.⁹⁴ Indeed, both the decreasing demand and the housing shortage created by the thousands of servicemen returning from the battlefields in Europe and in the Pacific could only be resolved by rendering the suburban American Dream possible.

Moreover, in the broader context of the Cold War, America had to shine. A nation of free, wealthy homeowners was definitely more appealing than one of poor people living in government-issued housing blocks. Suburbia brought to life the clash between two completely different ways of life and systems. It was the clash between capitalism and socialism, a market- and consumption-driven economy versus a planned economy, private versus collective property, and, ultimately, the single family home versus the cramped, old apartment block. Thus, Suburbia became a tool of soft power diplomacy benefiting the global fight against the “empire of evil”.

The interconnected themes of the home and the Cold War became evident in the 1959 “kitchen debate” between then Vice President Richard Nixon and Nikita Krushchev, which took place in Moscow. The exhibition displayed an American suburban home, with a focus on the kitchen, which boasted numerous state-of-the-art appliances to prove the superiority of the American way of life.⁹⁵

Nixon then stated that all of these appliances were “what freedom means to us”. He also argued that with 75 percent of America’s 44 million families owning a house, as well as 56 million automobiles, 50 million televisions and 146 million radios, “the United States

⁹⁴ James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere*, p. 101.

⁹⁵ Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, p. 148.

comes closest to the ideal of prosperity for all in a classless society”. The final blow came when he glorified the variety of goods available to Americans as symbolic of a right to choose, for Americans “do not wish to have decisions made at the top by government officials, be it about the kind of house or the kind of ideas”.⁹⁶ To say that toasters and free Pepsi helped the United States win the Cold War is an overstatement, but they definitely contributed to the positive global image of America.

American homeownership - and general ownership of consumer goods - as cited by Nixon did not happen overnight, but was the result of years of tailored public policies and actions by both governmental actors and private enterprises.

As it has been already stated, the United States, which had been facing a housing shortage since the Great Depression, had to find a definitive solution once 16 million servicemen returned to their cities, towns and villages. While some states had taken individual actions in the meantime - notably North Dakota which repurposed surplus grain bins into apartments -, the United States Congress passed the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act in 1944, which created the Veterans Administration mortgage program. This law, also known as the GI Bill, allowed servicemen to start mortgages with low interest rates and no down payment, while insuring these mortgages through the FHA. Therefore, for many Americans, it was cheaper to buy than to rent.⁹⁷

The GI bill jumpstarted the American economy after the war. Its aim was to avoid the massive unemployment and social unrest that characterized the years that followed World War I. By offering affordable housing payment plans and access to higher education, the federal government actively invested in the future of America by making it a nation of skilled, highly educated homeowners. Half of the returning veterans opted for higher education, with over 2.2 million pursuing a college degree, 3.5 million enrolled in other

⁹⁶ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic, The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, Vintage, 2003, p. 126.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

schooling and another 2 million chose on-the-job or farm training.⁹⁸ However, what is most important are the figures regarding homeownership. By 1956, 42 percent of veterans were homeowners.⁹⁹

Of course, the GI Bill has also faced some criticism. As a matter of fact, some have argued that it created inequality and differences between veterans and non-veterans, among veterans, and between men and women. These critics stem from data that shows that male veterans had access to more affordable higher education, thus leading to better paying jobs and faster homeownership. Therefore, male veterans quickly acquired more wealth than any other member of society across all spectrums of age, gender and ethnicity.¹⁰⁰

The favorable market conditions created by the GI bill stimulated a steep increase in housing construction. Indeed, single-family housing starts increased from 114,000 in 1944 to over 1,692,000 in 1950.¹⁰¹ One family-run company contributed to this rapid increase: the Levitt and Sons. Alfred Levitt believed that “as in your car, the parts in a Levitt house are standardized; each part will fit any house of the same model [...] the Levitt factory [...] is the land on which we assemble our houses”. Together with his brother William, who once stated that “no man who owns his house and lot can be a Communist”, the Levitts started off with 750 FHA homes in Norfolk, Virginia in 1942. Their peculiarity was that every house was the same. They had the same frame, the same doors, and the same layout. This single design helped lower their cost.¹⁰²

The Levitts were not the first ones to introduce rapidly produced housing. In fact, many mail-order companies offered pre-assembled bathrooms and kitchens already in the 1930s. But the Levitts produced at a scale no company had ever produced before. To do so, they standardized production by verticalizing the integration of suppliers. All materials were

⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 139-140.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 141.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 156.

¹⁰¹ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, p. 233.

¹⁰² Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, p. 133.

bought by their subsidiary, the North Shore Supply Company, and they even controlled their source of wood with the Grizzly Peak Lumber Company in California. They began selling their simplest homes for \$6,990. The Cape Cods, as they were called, resembled colonial farmhouses and offered a kitchen, a living room, two bedrooms, one bathroom and a driveway, all in just 800 square feet. Soon after they launched the Ranch, which cost one thousand dollars more than the Cape Cod, but featured a garage. The first Levittowns were regarded positively by the general public, despite the Levitts showing some poor planning with regards to sewage, public transport and trash removal.¹⁰³



Figure 10. Traditional and modified Cape Cods in Levittown, Pennsylvania.

Nevertheless, the accessible price of the homes built by the Levitts made them incredibly sought after. The first Levittown was built 25 miles east of Manhattan and was made of over 17,400 homes and 82,000 residents. They planted apple and cherry trees, and they built nine swimming pools, 60 playgrounds, ten baseball pitches and seven gardens to let the inhabitants enjoy nature away from the city. In the 1950s, the Levitt brothers built a

¹⁰³ Ibid., pp. 132-138.

Levittown in lower Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Located north of Philadelphia, it totals 16,000 homes. Every section is named after a letter of the alphabet, and every road and lane of that section begins with said letter. For instance, roads in the “M section” are called Magnolia Drive, Mistletoe Lane, Meadow Lane, Midwood Lane, Mockorange Lane, Myrtle Lane, Mallow Lane, Maple Lane, Mountain Lane, Morning Glory Lane, Mulberry Lane and Marigold Circle. This Levittown, which I visited on numerous occasions during my internship in Philadelphia, still maintains its working-class population and it definitely is not a fancy suburb as others in Bucks County. In fact, during my last visit, I found some lots to be quite neglected, with poorly maintained homes and unkept lawns. The Levitts built a third Levittown in the 1960s in Willingboro, New Jersey, which is still within commuting distance to Philadelphia. The impact of Levittowns on the post World War II suburb was massive, with some arguing that the Levitt suburbs were as important to the suburbs as the Ford Model T was to the car, for both offered an affordable and mass-produced commodity to the middle class.¹⁰⁴



Figures 11 and 12. Traditional and modified Cape Cods in Levittown, Pennsylvania.

¹⁰⁴ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, pp. 234-238.

Levittowns were not the only mass produced suburbs. Lakewood was a development in Long Beach, California, which held over 17,000 houses and 80,000 people. Developed by Ben Weingart, Mark Taper, and Louis Boyar, which bought over ten square miles of land in 1949, Lakewood was advertised as selling happiness in homes. The development had an efficient sewage system, as well as garbage disposal in each unit. They also built a major shopping mall, as well as sixteen smaller shopping centers. Another example is that of Park Forest, Illinois. Dubbed the GI Town, Park Forrest was built 30 miles south of Chicago near a railroad line. Developers Philip Klutznick and Nathan Manilow hired housing architects Jerrold Loeb and Norman Schlossman, and landscape architect Elbert Peets to draft the town plan. Park Forest was conceived as a garden city, with a train station, parks and shopping amenities. Streets were named after Illinois Congressional Medal of Honor winners. They also wanted to have different types of housing, with apartments, three kinds of row houses and six different houses. Two-story duplexes and apartments were grouped in superblocks and courtyards. Construction began in 1947 and proceeded so quickly that families began moving in in 1948. They were able to cut the costs and the time it took to build the houses by building the houses close to the street to save on piping, and by combining sidewalks and curbs to save on concrete. The single-family homes were built last and were sold at between \$12,500 and \$14,000. Thus, Park Forest was more expensive than Lakewood or the Levittowns. The GI town was a success and the population peaked at 30,000 in 1956.¹⁰⁵

Another very important piece of legislation for its direct implications on Suburbia is the Interstate Highway Act of 1956. After more than 10 years of lobbying by the American Road Building Association, a pressure group headed by General Motors, the Interstate Highway Act was signed by President Dwight Eisenhower. It financed 41,000 miles of new highways across the United States, with funding coming 90 percent from the federal

¹⁰⁵ Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, pp. 138-146.

government and 10 percent from the states. The alleged purpose of the Interstate Highway system was to create a “National System of Defense and Interstate Highways” to allegedly improve logistics in case of war, although the Defense Department was never consulted and most overpasses did not have enough clearance in order for military transport to go beneath them.¹⁰⁶

Moreover, it called for the improvement and widening of local roads to facilitate urban sprawl. This helped convey more traffic to and from suburbs, and helped carry the ever-increasing number of cars. The idea was to link major cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants and to build circumferential beltways around them. More often than not, these highway rings helped separate the affluent suburban neighborhoods from the decadent inner cities. President Eisenhower stated that this law was needed, for current highways were unsafe, cars would often get stuck in traffic jams, poor road quality made transportation more expensive and difficult for businesses, and “in case of atomic attack on our key cities, the road net must permit quick evacuation of target areas”.¹⁰⁷ The superhighways made every urban hinterland accessible, thus temporarily sealing the fate of the city that was being abandoned by the few remaining residents. The amount of work this project entailed made the economy boom, despite the growing expenses of the Vietnam War.¹⁰⁸

While the GI Bill and FHA backed mortgages stemmed from government policies, the private sector elaborated a whole culture of consumerism to support the overall demand of goods across all sectors. Domestic mass consumption became heavily intertwined with America’s foreign policy in its cultural war against Soviet Communism, but it also shaped postwar American society. Historian David Potter argues that Americans’ national character is the product of an economy of “inexhaustible abundance”, which during the second half of the 1900s took the form of a “consumer’s culture”, with advertisement joining “the charmed

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 166.

¹⁰⁷ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, pp. 248-249.

¹⁰⁸ James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere*, pp. 106-107.

circle of institutions which fix the values and standards of a society”.¹⁰⁹ Consumerism was negatively regarded by economist John Kenneth Galbraith, who described the state of the American society in the 1950s as “private opulence amid public squalor”, blaming advertisement and the hunger for consumption it produced for the decaying social consumption, namely schools, hospitals and other infrastructure.¹¹⁰ The reliance turned dependence on the automobile meant that the majority of public funds were funneled towards America’s endless highways. As stated by James Howard Kunstler, “because our highways were gold-plated with our national wealth, all other forms of public buildings were impoverished”.¹¹¹ He claims that after the 1950s, the majority of schools, town halls, post offices, museums and libraries all look the same: a concrete block with cheap plastic finishes. While there were some academics that were fascinated by the new American landscape, many argued against it.¹¹² Kunstler goes on to explain what went wrong in the city planning of his city: Saratoga Springs, New York. While the major and precise criticism of the development of this city in the Hudson Valley shall not be covered here, Kunstler argues that even many buildings that only needed to be refurbished were torn down and rebuilt in a cheaper fashion and useless style to both fit the zoning laws and to satisfy the entitlement for new buildings many Americans felt after winning World War II.¹¹³

Nevertheless, consumerism was seen as a postwar strategy to reconstruct the United States’ economy and reaffirm its democratic values through the expansion of mass consumption. Mass consumption was not seen as personal indulgence, but rather as a civic responsibility to provide full employment and improved living standards in the United States.

¹⁰⁹ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic*, p. 10.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

¹¹¹ James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere*, p. 121.

¹¹² Among those who appreciated or, at least, tolerated the pauper decoration of postwar public buildings were Professor John Jackson of Harvard University and Professor Peirce Lewis. The former argued that he did not object to the ugliness and commonness of American cities, while the latter claimed that despite the resentment some felt toward the changing landscape of America, nothing could be done about it, for even those who criticized it would not give up the comfort and privacy of their suburban home. For more on these arguments, *ibid.*, pp. 122-123.

¹¹³ For more on Saratoga Springs, New York, *ibid.*, pp. 133-146.

After the war, a mass-consumption oriented economy seemed the best way to reach prosperity and national security. As stated by the *Bride's* magazine, when you buy “the dozens of things you never bought or even thought of before [...] you are helping to build greater security for the industries of this country. What you buy and how you buy it is very vital in your new life - and to our whole American way of living”. Saving money was considered unamerican, and was pictured by Walt Disney's Scrooge McDuck obsessively saving his gold coins, which was timely introduced in 1947.¹¹⁴

Between 1949 and 1973, median family income doubled, thus consumption was fueled. The housing boom pushed people to buy things to put in them, namely appliances and furniture. Refrigerators, washing machines, televisions became widely spread among American households. Lizabeth Cohen reports that the most remarkable indicator was the amount of families owning a refrigerator, which went from 44 percent in 1940 to 80 percent in 1950. Automobile production and purchase peaked in those 25 years. By the end of the 1950s, 75 percent of American households had a car.¹¹⁵

Producers were soon faced with challenges, the most pressing being how to keep demand growing after the savings and the postponed purchases due to the war were over. They realized that the whole FHA and VA mortgages program grew Americans accustomed to debt and credit. Therefore, they noticed that American households would not be against buying smaller and relatively cheaper items on credit. In 1955, *Life* magazine observed a “revolution in consumer spending”, meaning that “instead of saving for years to afford major purchases, customers buy on credit and enjoy the goods while they pay for them”. The majority of household appliances and cars were bought on credit, and the rate at which families were going into debt was faster than their income.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, pp. 113-121.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 121-123.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124.

In this credit-dominated purchasing environment, credit cards made their debut. The first one was Diners Club in 1949, soon followed by American Express, Bank of America and Chase Manhattan Bank. By 1957, almost 70 percent of American households carried some form of debt, and a study from 1958 showed that whereas during the Great Depression 35 percent of the 70,000 personal bankruptcies were by workers, at the beginning of the credit card era 85 percent of the 80,000 were, showing that some households went into too much debt and could not keep up with the payments. Nevertheless, for those who could afford installments, credit allowed families to enjoy the prosperity of the postwar economic boom.¹¹⁷ As stated by Jack Isidor Straus, one of Macy's board chairmen, in 1965, "our economy keeps growing because our ability to consume is endless. The consumer goes on spending regardless of how many possessions he has. The luxuries of today are the necessities of tomorrow".¹¹⁸

The ubiquitous presence of the car combined with suburban sprawl meant that businesses had to change the way they operated to fit the new *American way of life*. Therefore, a drive-in culture soon emerged, which meant that all kinds of establishments had to keep in mind that the patrons would most likely come by car.

The first new establishment is the motel. The motel, a new word coined in 1926 by a hotel operator in San Luis Obispo, California, was born out of the need for motorists to rest along the highway after a long drive. It allowed them to park their car right in front of their room. While motels did make their appearance before World War II, their image improved as standardized chains made their debut after the war. In 1952, Kemmon Wilson and Wallace Johnson opened the first Holiday Inn in Memphis, Tennessee. The growth of the motel was exponential. In 1948, there were 26,000 motels in the United States. Just 12 years later, that

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 124.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 261.

figure increased to 60,000, which doubled by 1972. In contrast, old hotels in the city were closing rapidly, unable to keep their old appeal.¹¹⁹

Another very important yet short-lived element of drive-in culture was the drive-in theater. Born in 1933 in a small parking lot in Camden, New Jersey, the drive-in theater combined both the need for entertainment and the love for the automobile. Despite there being over 4,000 drive-in theaters in 1958, they soon lost popularity due to the increase in fuel and land prices, with their numbers steadily declining in favor of indoor, multiscreen theaters. Over time, the drive-in concept was used in all kinds of establishments, from funeral homes to hamburger joints - the most famous one being McDonald's -, banks and even churches.¹²⁰



Figure 13. A McDonald's in Levittown, Pennsylvania.

Nevertheless, one of the most important businesses that truly shaped the consumerist society of Suburbia is the mall. As with the motel and the drive-in theater, shopping malls existed before mass suburbanization. However, they were surpassed both in popularity and in

¹¹⁹ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, pp. 253-255.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 255-256.

number by stores located in the city center. Suburban malls were not immediately successful. Indeed, many shoppers, who were used to going to the corner store, still believed the city had the best shops and could provide the best shopping experience. However, suburban shopping malls soon became extremely popular and posed a grave danger to traditional urban stores. They provided all the things a suburbanite was looking for: ample and free parking, a great selection of items of every sort in just one place, and it was close to their suburban neighborhoods. Instead of carrying their groceries for blocks at a time, shoppers could just load the car and go back inside the mall to buy at other shops. In Paramus, New Jersey alone, two shopping malls - the Bergen Mall and the Garden State Plaza - were able to thrive despite being very close to Manhattan. Before 1946, there were only eight shopping malls in the United States.¹²¹ Over 22,000 shopping malls were built between the 1950s and the 1970s, with that figure doubling by the 1990s.¹²² The first major mall was planned by none other than Homer Hoyt in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1949, while one of the most successful early malls is the Poplar Plaza in Memphis, which offered over 500 parking spots for 30 small retailers and one department store. The first enclosed mall was the Southdale Shopping Center near Minneapolis, which opened in 1956.¹²³

Through their attempt to recreate the downtown shopping scene, shopping malls privatized a public, albeit liminal, space. Beyond their historical evolution, shopping malls also deserve attention as cultural and spatial institutions that profoundly shaped postwar suburban life. Jon Goss argues that the American shopping mall should not be understood merely as a retail facility but as a carefully designed environment whose architecture, symbolism, and spatial organization actively influence consumer behavior. Rather than

¹²¹ These were Upper Darby Center in West Philadelphia (1927), Suburban Square in Ardmore, Pennsylvania (1928), Highland Park Shopping Village in Dallas (1931), River Oaks in Houston (1937), Hampton Village in St. Louis (1941), Colony in Toledo, Ohio (1944), Shirlington in Arlington, Virginia (1944), and Bellevue Square in Seattle (1946), as reported by *ibid.*, p. 259.

¹²² Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, p. 170.

¹²³ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, pp. 258-259.

simply responding to existing demand, the mall constructs a particular experience of consumption by combining commercial functions with elements traditionally associated with public space, such as streets, squares, marketplaces, and civic gathering places. Through this carefully orchestrated environment, shopping is transformed into a leisure activity and a form of social participation, while consumption itself becomes closely linked to personal identity and lifestyle. In this sense, the suburban mall emerged as a symbolic center of postwar suburbia, replacing many of the social functions historically performed by traditional downtowns. It offered residents a controlled, safe, and climate-regulated environment that reflected the broader values of Cold War America, including prosperity, abundance, and mass consumption. As Goss suggests, the mall became a “machine for shopping,” designed not only to maximize commercial activity but also to naturalize consumer culture by embedding it within an idealized and familiar landscape that blurred the boundaries between public life and private enterprise.¹²⁴

It is now important to look at the data on Suburbia. Between 1947 and 1953, suburban population increased by 43 percent, while the overall population of the United States increased by 11 percent. In the 1950s, the largest metropolitan areas grew by .1 percent, while their suburbs by 45 percent. In 1953, the 30 million suburbanites represented 19 percent of all Americans, but spent 29 percent of the total wealth. Consumer expenditures in automobiles and appliances went, adjusted for inflation, from \$718 to \$2513 between 1941 and 1961. During the same timeframe, homeownership grew from 44 to 62 percent. This all leads to the conclusion that the suburbs were inhabited by middle-class, wealth-building Americans. As reported by *Newsweek*, the suburbanite was becoming “a man of property. His savings may be in the form of equities in house and appliances, but month by month he is becoming a man

¹²⁴ Jon Goss, “The ‘Magic of the Mall’: An Analysis of Form, Function, and Meaning in the Contemporary Retail Built Environment”, *The Urban Geography Reader*, edited by Nicholas Fyfe and Judith Kenny. Routledge, 2005, pp. 293-301.

of substance” since “his goods, his desires, his income, his numbers - all are going up and up”.¹²⁵

At this point, it is possible to outline the main common characteristics of the post-World-War-II suburbs. The first one is their peripheral location. In 1947, a Bureau of Labor Statistics survey showed that suburban development accounted for 62 percent of new construction. Moreover, a 1950 study showed that suburban growth was ten times faster than the growth of the city, despite urban areas having plenty of empty lots already serviced by electricity, sewers and pipes. Indeed, in the 1940s, more than nine million people moved to the suburbs. The suburban neighborhoods that grew within city limits tended to emerge right on the edge of the cities. For example, in Memphis, residential growth happened on the east side along Summer, Poplar, Walnut Grove, and Park Avenues, where large FHA and VA billboards advertised homes with no down payment. In Philadelphia, new suburban construction happened north of the city center on repurposed farm land.¹²⁶



Figures 14 and 15. Suburban Hunters Creek, Florida, south of Orlando.

¹²⁵ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, pp. 195-196.

¹²⁶ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, pp. 238-239.

The second common characteristic is their low density. The row house soon lost its popularity and between 1946 and 1956, 97 percent of new single-family homes were detached, surrounded by their own plot of land. The population density of Levittown, Long Island, at 10,500 people per square mile, was half of that of the streetcar suburb. New neighborhoods were also built on the assumption that their residents would have a car, meaning that those who lacked one had trouble going to work or running errands.¹²⁷



Figures 16 and 17. Hawaiian Suburbs on the outskirts of Honolulu.

The third characteristic is their architectural similarity. While the rich paid for custom designs, most developers offered just a couple of designs to reduce costs and simplify production. This created a monotonous landscape before the residents transformed their houses based on their needs. In fact, many homes in Levittown, Pennsylvania, do not resemble the original Cape Cods, for some owners added garages, second floors, front porches and back patios. The architectural similarity eliminated the regional style of housing. Indeed, before World War I, different American regions had their own residential style.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 239.

Across the country, the colonial style homes of New England were different from the row houses of the Atlantic coast cities, which in turn were different from raised plantation homes in the bayous of Louisiana, which were different from the hispanic houses of the Southwest. After World War II, the increasing popularity and omnipresence of the Cape Cod cottage significantly reduced this regionalism. By looking at a picture of an American suburb in the 1960s, nobody could tell whether said suburb is located in Pittsburgh, Kansas City or Seattle.¹²⁸



Figure 18. Aerial view of a suburban neighborhood in Washington State.

The fourth characteristic is the easy availability of housing and its reduced suggestion of wealth. While of course there were still suburbs and developments for the wealthy, postwar suburbs lowered the threshold of purchase, thus offering homeownership to the masses. The combination of government help, mass production, high wages, and low interest rates made it cheaper to buy new suburban housing than to rent or buy in the city.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Ibid., pp. 239-240.

¹²⁹ Ibid., pp. 240-241.



Figure 19. A suburb on the south side of Anchorage, Alaska.

Finally, the fifth characteristic is the economic and racial homogeneity. Most suburban developments after World War II were inhabited by white, middle-class families. The Levitts refused to sell their houses to African Americans and William Levitt once said that “we can solve a housing problem, or we can try to solve a racial problem. But we cannot combine the two”. In 1960, none of Levittown, Long Island’s 82,000 residents was African American. Through zoning, developers tried to preserve racial segregation and property values by keeping industries and undesirable residents out of wealthy areas.¹³⁰

As a matter of fact, the issue of racial segregation, which was partly covered in the previous chapter, did not improve after World War II. African Americans were still excluded from purchasing a home in the suburbs. The vast majority of Black veterans did not qualify for the help created by the GI Bill. While part of the issue was the difficulty many experienced in navigating the bureaucracy, the strong ties between the GI Bill and private institutions impregnated with prejudices against African Americans made it extremely hard to qualify for a loan. If they did, redlining and zoning laws made it difficult for them to find

¹³⁰ Ibid., pp. 241-242.

appropriate housing. In 1948, the United States Supreme Court in *Shelley v. Kraemer* ruled that restrictive covenants were unconstitutional. However, many communities still refused to sell their homes to African Americans.¹³¹

The phenomenon of white flight, meaning whites moving out of neighborhoods where an African American family had moved or was planning to, was occurring across the United States. In the 1950s, three Whites moved out for every two Blacks that moved into a neighborhood. The reasons for the white flight varied. Some believed that African Americans were the bearers of poverty and crime, while others claimed that their houses were losing value as African Americans moved in their neighborhoods. Indeed, when the Myers family moved into Levittown, Pennsylvania in 1957 following a house resale, one neighbour told a reporter that “he’s probably a nice guy, but every time I look at him I see \$2000 drop off the value of my house”. Other neighbours reacted much more violently, with crossburnings and rocks thrown at the Myers’ house.¹³²

Through a procedure known as blockbusting, real estate speculators used the racial fears of Whites to make a profit. As a matter of fact, they targeted White neighborhoods bordering Black neighborhoods, and instilled fear in their residents that African Americans were about to move there and convinced them to sell their homes below market value. They would pay African American women to walk around the neighborhoods with strollers, or ask African American men to knock on doors and ask if the house was for sale, only to scare the residents. If the speculators were successful, they would then sell or rent the homes to African Americans, who could not qualify for a FHA-backed loan, above market price, thus making a profit.¹³³

Another way to keep housing segregation intact was that of building highways through African American neighborhoods to move them away from downtown districts. The

¹³¹ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic*, pp. 166-167, 216.

¹³² Ibid., p. 217.

¹³³ Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law*, pp. 95-96.

justification was slum clearance, meaning tearing down squalid tenements to rebuild decent housing for Blacks and minorities. While the first part of the equation was effective, the second seldom took place. In fact, as was stated numerous times during the civil rights movement, “urban renewal means Negro removal”. African American neighborhoods were torn down to build the highways of the Interstate Highway Program. A congressional lobbyist and executive director of the American Association of State Highway Officials, Alfred Johnson, recalled that “some city officials expressed the view in the mid-1950s that the urban Interstates would give them a good opportunity to get rid of the local ‘niggertown’”. In 1956, Miami decided to route I-95 through an African American neighborhood, reducing its population from 40,000 to 8,000 when the highway was completed 10 years later. In Camden, New Jersey, between 1963 and 1967 roughly 3,000 low-income housing units were destroyed. In a report, the office of the New Jersey Attorney General stated that “it is obvious from a glance at the [...] transit plans that an attempt is being made to eliminate the Negro and Puerto Rican areas by [...] building highways that benefit white suburbanites, facilitating their movement from the suburbs to work and back”.¹³⁴



Figure 20. Panoramic view of Downtown Memphis, Tennessee.

¹³⁴ Ibid., pp. 126-129.

From an economic standpoint, David Harvey argues that the suburban solution to the underconsumption problem has been debt-financed homeownership and transportation following the end of World War II. By creating a constant demand for these products, capitalism has been insulated against the threats of crises of underconsumption. On one hand, Suburbia sustains demand and therefore fosters capital accumulation, while on the other it creates a white-collar, competitive and individualistic society that is the perfect breeding ground for consumption. According to Harvey, suburbanization, just as urban renewal and gentrification,¹³⁵ have to be understood in terms of the expansionary thrust of capital accumulation.¹³⁶

An interesting take on the causes of urban sprawl is that of Robert Bruegmann. He argues that urban sprawl is not caused by the “traditional” issues of racism, the anti-urban bias, capitalism, technology, and the government, but rather by affluence. In fact, Bruegmann claims that cities with a low African American population were sprawling as much as cities with a higher African American population, thus partially disproving the myth of white flight. Also, he argues that even if the government had not subsidized and encouraged suburbanization through the GI Bill or the Interstate Highway Act, Americans would not have stayed in their crowded cities in name of an alleged sense of community that is built with density. Moreover, the car is not fully to blame, because for example Los Angeles began sprawling way before mass auto ownership. What seems to be the real cause is affluence, declined in three aspects. These aspects are privacy, mobility and choice. The first is the ability to control one’s own surroundings. The second is to be intended as both personal and social mobility. Finally the third is the ability to choose where to live. These aspects, once only in the wealthiest’s purview, were now made available to middle class families through

¹³⁵ These two concepts will be explored in the next chapter.

¹³⁶ David Harvey, *The Urban Experience*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985, pp. 39, 122, 250.

urban sprawl and suburbanization. Although Bruegmann's theories can be disputed, they surely provide an additional interesting point of view.¹³⁷

However, the best theoretical explanation for the way cities in America were developing was elaborated by Chauncy D. Harris and Edward L. Ullman. In 1945, they published *The Nature of Cities*, one of the most influential contributions to twentieth-century urban geography. Rather than proposing another descriptive model of urban morphology, Harris and Ullman sought to explain why cities develop particular spatial structures and how their internal organization reflects the economic functions they perform. Their objective was not merely to classify cities according to their appearance, but to identify the processes governing their growth and functional differentiation.

The authors begin by challenging the tendency to define cities exclusively through demographic criteria or administrative boundaries. Although population size is often used to distinguish urban from rural settlements, Harris and Ullman argue that such measures reveal little about the actual nature of cities. A settlement cannot be understood simply by counting its inhabitants. Rather, its significance derives from the functions it performs within a broader economic and geographical system. Cities exist because they provide goods, services, and specialized activities for populations extending well beyond their immediate boundaries. Consequently, urban development should be interpreted primarily as a functional and economic phenomenon rather than merely a demographic one.¹³⁸

According to Harris and Ullman, every city depends upon a surrounding area that supports its existence. This "urban support" consists of the territory from which the city draws its resources and to which it provides services. The relationship between the city and its hinterland is therefore reciprocal. Rural areas supply agricultural products, raw materials,

¹³⁷ Robert Bruegmann, "The Causes of Sprawl", *The City Reader*, edited by Richard LeGates and Frederic Stout, Routledge, 2016, pp. 218-228.

¹³⁸ Chauncy D. Harris and Edward L. Ullman, "The Nature of Cities", *The Urban Geography Reader*, edited by Nicholas Fyfe and Judith Kenny. Routledge, 2005, p. 47.

labour, and consumers, while the city offers markets, administrative functions, transportation facilities, financial services, education, and commercial opportunities. Urban settlements should thus be viewed as nodes within wider regional networks rather than isolated entities.

Building upon this perspective, Harris and Ullman identify three principal bases upon which cities develop. The first consists of cities functioning as central places. Borrowing from the ideas developed by Walter Christaller, they argue that many cities owe their existence to their ability to provide goods and services to the surrounding population. Retail trade, banking, education, healthcare, legal services, and government administration all require a sufficiently large market area to operate efficiently. As populations become more dispersed across the countryside, numerous settlements emerge to satisfy different levels of demand, creating a hierarchical network of urban centres. Larger cities offer highly specialized services that cannot be sustained in smaller towns, while smaller settlements provide everyday necessities for their immediate hinterland. Urban systems therefore develop not randomly but according to the economic geography of market demand.

A second category comprises cities whose development is primarily determined by transportation functions. Throughout history, transportation has been one of the most powerful forces shaping urban growth. Ports, river crossings, railway junctions, highway intersections, and other strategic locations facilitate the movement of goods and people, creating favourable conditions for commercial exchange. Cities situated at these points frequently become centres of distribution, warehousing, manufacturing, and trade. Harris and Ullman emphasize that improvements in transportation technology continually reshape the urban hierarchy. As new transport routes emerge and older ones decline, cities may experience rapid growth or gradual stagnation depending upon their ability to adapt to changing economic conditions.

The third category includes cities that develop because of specialized functions. Certain urban centres arise not primarily because they serve surrounding populations or transportation networks, but because they concentrate particular economic activities. Mining towns emerge near valuable mineral deposits, manufacturing cities grow where industrial production becomes highly concentrated, university towns develop around educational institutions, administrative capitals are established to accommodate political functions, and tourist centres expand where natural or cultural attractions generate sustained economic demand. In these cases, specialization rather than market centrality becomes the principal force explaining urban growth.

Harris and Ullman stress that these three categories should not be understood as mutually exclusive. On the contrary, most cities perform several of these functions simultaneously, although one may be more prominent than the others at a particular stage of development. A city that originally emerged as a transportation hub may later become an important manufacturing centre, while a commercial city may subsequently acquire administrative or educational functions. Urban evolution is therefore characterized by continuous adaptation rather than rigid functional classification. The complexity of modern cities derives precisely from the accumulation and interaction of multiple economic roles over time.¹³⁹

This functional interpretation represents one of the most important contributions of Harris and Ullman's work. Rather than viewing cities as static physical forms, they conceive them as dynamic economic organisms whose internal structure reflects changing patterns of production, exchange, mobility, and specialization. Urban space is constantly reorganized in response to shifting economic forces, technological innovation, and the evolving relationships

¹³⁹ Ibid., pp. 47-50.

between different activities. Consequently, any attempt to explain the internal morphology of cities must begin by understanding the economic logic underlying their development.

It is precisely from this functional conception of urban growth that Harris and Ullman proceed to challenge the dominant theories of urban structure developed during the first half of the twentieth century. While earlier models portrayed the city as an orderly and relatively uniform organism expanding outward from a single central core, the increasing complexity of modern metropolitan areas suggested that such interpretations were becoming progressively inadequate. Their critique of these traditional models ultimately laid the foundations for what would become their most enduring contribution to urban geography: the Multiple Nuclei Model.

Having established that cities develop according to the economic functions they perform, Harris and Ullman turn their attention to a second and equally significant question: how are these functions arranged within the urban landscape? This issue had already attracted considerable attention among urban geographers and sociologists during the first decades of the twentieth century, giving rise to several influential models of urban structure. Among these, the concentric zone model proposed by Ernest Burgess and the sector model developed by Homer Hoyt represented the most widely accepted explanations of metropolitan growth. Harris and Ullman acknowledge the value of both contributions but argue that neither is capable of explaining the increasing complexity of modern American cities. Burgess' and Hoyt's models are now reviewed.

The concentric zone model conceived the city as a series of expanding rings radiating outward from a single Central Business District (CBD). According to Burgess, urban development followed a relatively ordered sequence in which commercial activities occupied the city centre, while successive residential zones reflected increasing levels of socioeconomic status and distance from the core. The model successfully described several

industrial cities during the early twentieth century, particularly Chicago, whose rapid expansion appeared to follow this general pattern. Nevertheless, Harris and Ullman observe that many American cities had already begun to diverge from this idealized structure. Rather than expanding uniformly around a single centre, they displayed a far more irregular and differentiated internal organization.

Hoyt's sector model represented an important refinement of Burgess's theory by recognizing that urban growth frequently follows major transportation corridors rather than expanding equally in all directions. Industrial districts, high-income residential areas, and commercial developments often extend outward along railways, rivers, or major roads, producing wedge-shaped sectors instead of concentric rings. This approach provided a more realistic interpretation of land values and residential differentiation, particularly in rapidly industrializing metropolitan regions.

Yet even Hoyt's model, Harris and Ullman argue, remains constrained by a fundamental assumption: namely, that the city continues to revolve around a single dominant centre. Whether urban activities expand through concentric rings or through sectors, both theories ultimately portray the metropolis as a monocentric organism whose various functions remain dependent upon the Central Business District. Such an interpretation increasingly failed to correspond with empirical observation.

The authors maintain that modern cities exhibit a much greater degree of functional differentiation than either Burgess or Hoyt had anticipated. Economic activities no longer concentrate exclusively within one central location. Instead, different functions tend to establish themselves wherever local conditions prove most advantageous for their operation. As cities grow larger and transportation systems become more sophisticated, new concentrations of activity emerge outside the traditional downtown. These centres gradually

acquire specialized economic roles while maintaining functional relationships with the rest of the metropolitan area.

To explain this phenomenon, Harris and Ullman propose what would become known as the Multiple Nuclei Model. Rather than viewing the city as a single organism expanding from one core, they argue that urban development is organized around numerous distinct nuclei, each characterized by particular activities and land uses. The Central Business District generally retains considerable importance, especially for finance, administration, and specialized retail, but it no longer monopolizes urban functions. Instead, it coexists with a variety of secondary centres that perform different economic roles.

The emergence of multiple nuclei is not accidental. Harris and Ullman identify several economic principles that explain why particular activities cluster together while others remain spatially separated. Certain functions derive substantial advantages from mutual proximity. Similar businesses benefit from shared infrastructure, specialized labour markets, access to common suppliers, and the concentration of consumers. Retail establishments often prefer neighbouring locations because they collectively attract greater numbers of customers than they would individually. Likewise, financial institutions, government offices, and professional services frequently cluster together to exploit economies of agglomeration and facilitate interactions among related activities.

Conversely, some land uses actively repel one another. Heavy industry, for example, generates pollution, noise, and congestion that make nearby residential development undesirable. High-income residential districts often avoid proximity to manufacturing plants or freight terminals in order to preserve environmental quality and property values. Wholesale markets requiring extensive transportation facilities may compete for land with commercial or residential uses, encouraging each activity to seek more favourable locations

elsewhere within the metropolitan region. Urban space therefore reflects not only forces of attraction but also processes of mutual exclusion.

Land values constitute another decisive factor shaping the internal organization of cities. Activities capable of generating exceptionally high returns can afford to occupy expensive central locations, whereas land-intensive uses requiring large parcels frequently relocate toward peripheral areas where land is cheaper and more abundant. Manufacturing plants, warehouses, airports, and institutional campuses therefore tend to establish themselves outside the traditional city centre once metropolitan growth increases central land values beyond economically sustainable levels.

Transportation also plays a fundamental role in reinforcing this spatial differentiation. Improvements in road networks, rail infrastructure, and other transport systems reduce the necessity for firms to remain concentrated within a single downtown location. Enhanced accessibility allows businesses to relocate while maintaining efficient connections with suppliers, customers, and labour markets. Consequently, transportation does not merely facilitate urban growth; it actively reshapes metropolitan structure by enabling the geographical redistribution of economic activities.

The interaction of these various forces produces an urban landscape characterized by increasing specialization. Industrial districts, wholesale centres, residential neighbourhoods, university campuses, governmental complexes, recreational facilities, and commercial areas each occupy locations reflecting their particular functional requirements. Rather than forming a random mosaic, these nuclei collectively constitute an integrated metropolitan system whose complexity exceeds that envisaged by earlier theories of urban morphology.

The significance of the Multiple Nuclei Model therefore lies not simply in replacing one spatial diagram with another, but in fundamentally redefining the nature of urban growth. The metropolis is no longer understood as a single center surrounded by subordinate

peripheral zones. Instead, it emerges as a dynamic constellation of interconnected yet functionally differentiated centres whose relationships evolve continuously in response to changing economic conditions, technological innovation, and patterns of mobility. In this sense, Harris and Ullman's model represents a decisive departure from earlier conceptions of urban structure and provides a more flexible framework for interpreting the increasingly complex geography of twentieth-century cities.¹⁴⁰

This interpretation also helps explain why metropolitan growth generates increasing spatial complexity over time. As urban populations expand and economic activities diversify, the concentration of all functions within a single central business district becomes progressively less efficient. Congestion, rising land values, traffic, and competition for space encourage many activities to relocate to alternative sites where operating conditions are more favourable. At the same time, improvements in transportation and communication reduce the necessity for firms to remain physically concentrated in one location. The metropolis consequently evolves through a process of decentralization without necessarily losing its functional integration.

Importantly, Harris and Ullman do not describe decentralization as a process of urban decline. Rather, they interpret it as a natural consequence of metropolitan growth. The appearance of secondary commercial districts, industrial zones, institutional complexes, or residential centres should therefore not be understood as evidence that the traditional city is disappearing. Instead, these new nuclei become complementary components of an increasingly sophisticated urban system. The metropolis continues to function as an integrated whole, even though its activities are distributed across multiple centres rather than concentrated exclusively within the downtown core.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 50-55.

Although written in 1945, the paper displays remarkable foresight in identifying trends that would become increasingly visible during the second half of the twentieth century. Harris and Ullman were observing metropolitan areas that were already beginning to outgrow the classical monocentric model. While many of the large-scale suburban developments associated with the postwar decades had not yet fully materialized, the underlying processes of functional differentiation and spatial decentralization were already reshaping American cities. Their analysis therefore captures a transitional moment in urban history, when the traditional industrial city was gradually giving way to a more complex metropolitan structure.

This historical context is particularly significant. The authors were writing immediately after World War II, at a moment when technological innovation, expanding transportation systems, and economic restructuring were creating new opportunities for metropolitan growth. Although their paper does not attempt to predict the subsequent suburban boom, its theoretical framework provides an exceptionally flexible explanation for the spatial transformations that would soon characterize the American metropolis. Rather than attributing urban change to a single historical event, Harris and Ullman identify structural mechanisms that operate whenever economic functions seek more efficient locations within an expanding metropolitan region.

Their approach also represents an important methodological innovation. Instead of constructing an idealized city based upon abstract geometric principles, Harris and Ullman derive their model inductively from empirical observation. They recognize that real cities rarely conform perfectly to any theoretical diagram. Consequently, the Multiple Nuclei Model should not be interpreted as a rigid blueprint but as an analytical framework capable of accommodating the diversity of urban development. Different metropolitan areas may exhibit varying numbers of nuclei, different degrees of specialization, and different patterns of

interaction, yet all remain consistent with the underlying principle that urban growth generates increasing functional differentiation.

For the study of American metropolitan and suburban development, this contribution is particularly valuable because it shifts analytical attention away from the central city alone and toward the metropolitan region as an integrated functional system. Urban change is no longer interpreted exclusively through the expansion or decline of downtown districts but through the evolving relationships among numerous interconnected centres. This broader metropolitan perspective would subsequently become indispensable for understanding the profound spatial transformations that reshaped the United States during the decades following World War II.

This perspective proved particularly significant in the decades following the publication of *The Nature of Cities*. During the second half of the twentieth century, American metropolitan areas experienced profound spatial transformations driven by unprecedented demographic growth, rising household incomes, widespread automobile ownership, and substantial investments in transportation infrastructure. Residential development increasingly extended beyond the traditional limits of the central city, while commercial, industrial, institutional, and administrative activities also began to disperse throughout the metropolitan region. Although Harris and Ullman do not explicitly describe these postwar developments, their functional approach provides an analytical framework capable of explaining why such decentralization occurred.

This interpretation is particularly relevant for understanding the evolution of suburban landscapes during the postwar period. Early suburbanization had largely been associated with residential decentralization. The suburb was primarily conceived as a place of domestic life, physically separated from the industrial congestion and perceived social problems of the central city. Harris and Ullman's framework, however, suggests that metropolitan expansion

cannot remain exclusively residential. As population disperses, other urban functions naturally follow. Commercial services relocate closer to suburban consumers; manufacturing plants seek larger and less expensive sites; educational institutions expand beyond congested urban centres; and administrative or recreational facilities develop wherever accessibility and available land make relocation economically advantageous.

The result is not the decline of the city but the increasing functional complexity of the metropolitan region. Rather than concentrating every activity within downtown, modern metropolitan areas distribute different functions across numerous specialized centres that remain economically interdependent. Urban growth therefore becomes increasingly polycentric, reflecting the interaction of complementary nuclei rather than the dominance of a single core. This transformation does not eliminate the importance of the traditional city centre, which often continues to perform highly specialized financial, governmental, and cultural functions. Instead, it modifies the balance between centrality and decentralization by allowing additional centres to assume significant economic roles within the metropolitan system.

Viewed from this perspective, *The Nature of Cities* occupies an important place within the broader evolution of twentieth-century urban theory. By moving beyond the monocentric assumptions of earlier models, Harris and Ullman offered a more dynamic understanding of metropolitan growth, one capable of accommodating the increasing functional differentiation that characterized modern American cities. Their work shifted attention from static descriptions of urban morphology to the economic processes underlying spatial organization, demonstrating that urban structure is fundamentally shaped by the locational requirements of different activities and by the changing relationships among them.

Although subsequent decades introduced new patterns of metropolitan expansion and increasingly complex forms of urban development, the central insight advanced by Harris and

Ullman remained remarkably durable. Cities continue to evolve through the interaction of specialized functions, transportation systems, land markets, and economic change rather than through uniform outward expansion from a single centre. Their functional approach therefore represents not only a critique of earlier theories but also a conceptual foundation for understanding the continuing transformation of the American metropolitan landscape throughout the twentieth century.

Chapter 3: The Return to the City

In the years that followed the peak of postwar suburban settlement, a process of rethinking the urban landscape took place. Urban economies started to shift from manufacturing to services, thus changing the nature of the city. Therefore, a longing for the urban began originating among those who had hitherto despised the city. Suddenly, the city was no longer considered dangerous. The inner city, which had been long considered the cradle of America's social issues - and therefore left for good as soon as families could afford it -, was regaining its appeal. This phenomenon of a return to the city is called gentrification.

Although a global phenomenon, I shall focus my attention solely on the United States. According to Neil Smith, gentrification is "the process [...] by which poor and working-class neighborhoods in the inner city are refurbished via an influx of private capital and middle-class homebuyers and renters - neighborhoods that had previously experienced disinvestment and a middle-class exodus".¹⁴¹ The reversal of what urban theorists had imagined appealed to some who considered gentrification an urban renaissance, the recycle and upgrade of an already existing urban neighborhood. Sharon Zukin identifies a landscape of power in gentrification. Indeed, she argues that gentrification is the expansion of downtown's physical area at the expense of the inner city. Thus, there is an outward diffusion of the geographical center of downtown's cultural power. This cultural transformation, although seemingly asserting a local identity, represents downtown's social transformation.¹⁴² Contrary to Smith, Zukin's prime focus on her take on gentrification was the landscape of power, with a primary focus on downtown rather than the inner city.

What both Zukin and Smith share is the feeling that gentrification is tied to the idea of the frontier, albeit an urban one. Indeed, the idea of the frontier which was discussed in the

¹⁴¹ Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier; Gentrification and The Revanchist City*, Routledge, 1997, p. 32.

¹⁴² Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power*, p. 187.

first chapter applies to gentrification, too. Nevertheless, the idea of frontier gains a different connotation when talking about gentrification. Indeed, the urban frontier is a reversed frontier. The urban pioneers are clearing the downtown frontier of existing populations.¹⁴³ The urban renewal rhetoric as the rehabilitation of the inner city created the figures of urban pioneers, urban homesteaders and urban cowboys. In the 1980s, there were also urban scouts, who, just like Lewis and Clark, ventured into the urban frontier to spot potentially gentrifying neighborhoods. As in the days of the Wild West, the importance of the frontier is given by the strong link between economic and geographical expansion. Nevertheless, economic expansion does not derive from purely geographical expansion, but rather by an “internal differentiation of already developed spaces”.¹⁴⁴ Also, only apparently does the frontier - both the “original” frontier and the urban - advance through the actions of individual pioneers, but rather through the actions of capital owners.¹⁴⁵ Gentrification is the frontier of economic profitability. Indeed, the gentrification frontier represents a line dividing areas of disinvestment from areas of reinvestment in the urban landscape.¹⁴⁶ The urban frontier conveys optimism about the future. As Smith reports, “the gentrification frontier absorbs and retransmits the distilled optimism of a new city, the promise of economic opportunity, the twin thrills of romance and rapacity; it is the place where the future will be made”.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, “the frontier imagery is neither merely decorative nor innocent ... but carries considerable ideological weight. Insofar as gentrification infects working-class communities, displaces poor households, and converts whole neighborhoods into bourgeois enclaves, the frontier ideology rationalizes social differentiations as natural, inevitable”.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 187-188.

¹⁴⁴ Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, pp. xiv-xvi.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. xvi.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p.190.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 189.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 17.



Figures 21 and 22. The Civil Rights Movement Museum in Memphis, Tennessee, and Jackie Smith protesting in front of it.

As with the original frontier, the gentrification frontier is not a line, a wall of even development, but rather a differentiated process with pockets of resistance.¹⁴⁹ The differentiated and contested nature of the gentrification frontier can be observed in concrete cases of resistance. One particularly emblematic example is that of Jacqueline Smith in Memphis, Tennessee. Jacqueline Smith has been protesting in front of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis since 1988. The Lorraine Motel is where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and killed on April 4th, 1968 and it has been hosting the National Civil Rights Museum since 1991. Jackie Smith argues that the purpose of the National Civil Rights Museum defies the values impersonated by Dr. King. Instead of carrying on his message of equality and social justice, the aim of the museum, which she calls the “Civil Wrong Museum”, is profit. By creating an attraction in the middle of an underprivileged neighborhood, she argues that gentrification would soon follow.¹⁵⁰ I can personally attest that Jackie Smith is still there and that fancy urban bars and luxury lofts surround the museum, although the poor, segregated

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 209.

¹⁵⁰ John Paul Jones, “The Street Politics of Jackie Smith”, *A Companion to The City*, edited by Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, Blackwell Publishers, 2000, pp. 448-459.

past of Memphis's inner city can still be felt clearly. On the day of my visit, on October 19th, 2025, she had been protesting for 37 years and 279 days.

Gentrification began in the 1950s, intensified in the 1960s, and in the 1970s it became a widespread movement. The causes and effects of gentrification are rooted in a complex nesting of social, political, economic and cultural shifts. There are various debates concerning the reasons why gentrification took place. Smith argues that some young people refuted the suburban American Dream that had so captivated their parents. Therefore, they decided to leave the suburbs and move to the city again. Others believe that the Oil Crisis of 1973 sealed the deal; as gas prices increased, so did the cost of commuting. Therefore, it was more convenient to live in the gentrified inner city.¹⁵¹

Neil Smith provides an economic theory as to why gentrification took place: the rent gap theory. This supply side economic theory stems from the gap between devalorization and revaluation. Indeed, as noted by Smith, "devalorization produces the objective economic conditions that make capital revaluation (gentrification) a rational market response".¹⁵² The rent gap can be defined as the difference between the level of ground rent that could potentially be realized under the most profitable land use and the ground rent that is actually capitalized under existing conditions. This gap does not arise spontaneously but is produced through specific historical and economic processes. Chief among these is capital devaluation, which progressively reduces the share of ground rent that can be extracted and capitalized from a given site under its current use. At the same time, ongoing urban development and metropolitan expansion tend to raise the potential ground rent of inner-city locations, even as their actual returns stagnate or decline.

This growing divergence between actual and potential ground rent helps explain the spatial patterns observed by Homer Hoyt in his 1928 analysis of urban land values. The

¹⁵¹ Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, pp. 51-52.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 67.

“valley” he identified - namely areas of depressed land values situated between zones of higher-value development - can be reinterpreted as the spatial expression of an emerging rent gap. As long as existing land uses are able to capitalize most or all of the potential ground rent, there is little economic incentive for redevelopment. In such circumstances, reinvestment remains unlikely, since redevelopment would yield limited or no additional returns.

However, as processes of filtering, disinvestment, and neighborhood decline advance, the rent gap continues to widen. Buildings deteriorate, property values fall, and actual ground rent declines further, while the underlying locational advantages of the area, such as proximity to the city center, infrastructure, and amenities, maintain or even increase its potential ground rent. It is only once this gap becomes sufficiently large that conditions for reinvestment are created.

Gentrification occurs precisely at this point. Developers are able to acquire properties at relatively low prices, reflecting their devalued state, and to compare the costs of rehabilitation - including construction expenses, financing costs, and expected profits - with the anticipated returns from selling or leasing the upgraded properties. When the projected sale price or rental income is high enough to cover these costs and still generate a satisfactory return, reinvestment becomes economically viable. Through this process, a substantial portion - if not the entirety - of the previously unrealized ground rent is newly capitalized. As a result, the neighborhood is effectively recycled within the urban land market. The built environment is renewed, land values rise, and the area enters a new cycle of use characterized by higher-income residents and more intensive capital investment. Gentrification, therefore, is not driven primarily by changing consumer preferences or cultural shifts, but by the

structural dynamics of capital circulation and the resolution of the rent gap within the urban landscape.¹⁵³

Moreover, once the rent gap reaches a sufficient scale, the process of gentrification can be set in motion by a variety of actors operating within the land and housing markets. At this stage, the relationship between production and consumption becomes central to understanding how gentrification actually unfolds. Empirical evidence consistently indicates that gentrification is rarely initiated by the autonomous exercise of individual consumer preferences, as suggested by neoclassical economic theory. Instead, it is more often triggered by forms of collective action at the neighborhood level, in which institutional and structural actors play a decisive role. Historically, the state was a primary agent in the early phases of gentrification in the United States, particularly through urban renewal programs that laid the groundwork for subsequent private reinvestment. Although direct state intervention has diminished in relative importance over time, public subsidies, fiscal incentives, and various forms of governmental sponsorship continue to shape and support gentrification processes. These interventions help reduce risk and signal investment opportunities to private capital.

In the contemporary context of market-led gentrification, financial institutions have assumed a central role. A critical moment in the initiation of gentrification often occurs when banks or other lending institutions reverse long-standing policies of redlining and begin to actively target specific neighborhoods as viable markets for mortgages and construction loans. Without this renewed access to credit, consumer demand alone is insufficient to produce gentrification. No matter how strong or widespread individual preferences for inner-city living may be, they remain economically ineffective in the absence of mortgage capital. Access to finance, in one form or another, thus constitutes a necessary precondition for gentrification.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Ibid., pp. 67-68.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 68.

While mortgage capital must ultimately be taken up by consumers willing to borrow, these consumer preferences are themselves not exogenous or purely individual. Rather, they are socially produced through institutional practices, market signals, and broader cultural and economic narratives that frame certain neighborhoods as desirable and “up-and-coming”. Alongside financial institutions, professional developers have typically functioned as the primary collective agents driving gentrification. Rather than rehabilitating isolated properties, developers usually acquire a substantial share of devalorized housing stock within a neighborhood, allowing them to coordinate reinvestment, manage risk, and maximize returns through scale. A notable exception to the predominance of collective capital can be found in neighborhoods located adjacent to areas that have already undergone gentrification. In such cases, individual gentrifiers may play a more visible role in initiating rehabilitation efforts. However, even here, their actions are strongly conditioned by the prior transformation of nearby neighborhoods, which reduces uncertainty and signals the likelihood of future appreciation. These individual decisions, therefore, remain fundamentally oriented toward sound financial investment and continue to depend on access to mortgage capital provided by willing financial institutions. As such, even seemingly individual-led gentrification is embedded within broader structures of capital circulation and collective investment.

Three main categories of developers tend to operate in neighborhoods undergoing processes of recycling and reinvestment. First, professional developers acquire properties, undertake their redevelopment, and subsequently sell them on the market in order to realize a profit. Second, occupier developers purchase and rehabilitate properties for their own use, occupying the dwelling once the renovation is completed. Third, landlord developers invest in the rehabilitation of housing stock with the intention of renting the properties to tenants after redevelopment. Returns on investment vary across these developer types but are ultimately derived from the enhanced value of the rehabilitated property. In the case of

professional developers, returns are primarily realized through the sale price of the completed property. For landlord developers, returns are obtained both through rental income and through the capitalization of increased ground rent. More generally, the gains associated with redevelopment consist of two distinct components: the capitalization of previously unrealized or undercapitalized ground rent, and the profit generated through the productive investment of capital in rehabilitation.¹⁵⁵

While professional and landlord developers play a significant role in gentrification, occupier developers are often more actively involved in rehabilitation in this sector than in other forms of housing construction. One reason for this lies in the pre-existing structure of the urban landscape. Since inner-city land has already been developed and is characterized by a complex and fragmented pattern of property ownership, it is frequently difficult for professional developers to assemble a sufficiently large and contiguous set of properties to justify large-scale intervention. Even landlord developers, when active, often rehabilitate multiple properties either simultaneously or in a sequential manner in order to achieve economies of scale. This fragmented ownership structure has created favorable conditions for the involvement of occupier developers. Although they are typically inefficient actors within the construction industry, their ability to acquire and rehabilitate individual properties makes them a plausible and effective mechanism for the transformation of devalORIZED neighborhoods. Seen from this perspective, gentrification should not be interpreted as a random occurrence or as an inexplicable reversal of a presumed natural process of neighborhood decline. Rather, it emerges as a structurally grounded outcome of historical patterns of capital devaluation.

Specifically, the devalorization of capital in many nineteenth-century inner-city neighborhoods, combined with continued urban growth throughout the first half of the

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 69.

twentieth century, produced the conditions under which profitable reinvestment became possible. If the rent gap theory of gentrification holds, one would expect rehabilitation to begin in locations where the gap between actual and potential ground rent was widest, and where the highest rates of return could be achieved. These conditions are most likely to be found in neighborhoods close to the city center and in areas where the downward trajectory of property values had largely exhausted itself.

However, this expectation should not be applied too mechanically. Empirical evidence does indicate that early waves of gentrification tended to concentrate near central urban areas, but the immediate causes of gentrification in any specific neighborhood are shaped by a complex combination of economic, institutional, and contextual factors. It is therefore not possible to identify a fixed threshold of decline that will inevitably trigger reinvestment. The rent gap theory nonetheless suggests a broader spatial logic: as initial areas are successfully recycled and opportunities for exceptionally high returns diminish, developers are likely to seek out new neighborhoods offering somewhat lower, but still attractive, rates of return. This process facilitates the gradual spatial diffusion of gentrification toward areas farther from the city center and toward neighborhoods where decline has been less pronounced. Taken together, Smith's framework shifts the explanation of gentrification away from individual choice and toward the structural logic of capital circulation, reinvestment, and uneven urban development.

While Smith's rent gap theory provides a powerful supply-side explanation of gentrification, it does not exhaust the range of interpretations. Other scholars have emphasized changes in class structure and demand-side dynamics, offering a different reading of the same process. Chris Hamnett provided a different interpretation of gentrification. While Smith explains the creation of "islands of renewal in seas of decay" from the supply side - namely the rent gap and the need for profit -, Hamnett argues that

gentrification is the product of the shift from industrial to postindustrial society and its changes in class structure.¹⁵⁶ Therefore, gentrification seems to be not the direct and inevitable consequence of the existence of the rent gap, but rather the result of the transformation of Western cities from manufacturing centers to centers of business and services. This shift changed income distribution, the housing market and cultural tastes and ideals. Hamnett quotes Ley in stating that “gentrification is primarily a phenomenon of the late twentieth-century postindustrial service-based city. As the economic structure of these cities has evolved, so the social and occupational structure of the city has changed, and a new group of residents with different educational backgrounds, cultural values, preferences, and orientations has emerged”.¹⁵⁷

Moreover, a devalued inner city property market is no guarantee for gentrification. Hamnett argues that cities like Detroit and neighborhoods like the Bronx have indeed not been subject to gentrification. The new middle class has to have a significantly higher income and wealth to outbid existing residents. Also, many wealthy people still prefer the suburbs. For example, Washington, DC, continues to grow and its inner city continues to remain mostly ungentrified.¹⁵⁸

A critique to the city and a push to make them better is expressed in Jane Jacobs’ book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. First of all, Jacobs acquits the omnipresent automobile from the charges against it. Indeed, she claims that cars are just an example of poor city building, not the cause thereof. Cities are just too intricate to build them around the needs of a car, so it just makes sense to concentrate on the easier task of developing a car oriented urban - or suburban - environment than to think more about how to

¹⁵⁶ Chris Hamnett, “Gentrification, Postindustrialism, and Industrial and Occupational Restructuring in Global Cities”, *A Companion to The City*, edited by Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson. Blackwell Publishers, 2000, pp. 332-333.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 334.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 336.

make cars and cities compatible.¹⁵⁹ When cities accommodate cars, “city streets are broken down into loose sprawls, incoherent and vacuous for anyone afoot”.¹⁶⁰ After all, the car serves the purpose of protecting people from the dangerous urban landscape. Trapped in its individuality, the urban pioneer fences off the undesirables.¹⁶¹ Cities are not just bigger towns or denser suburbs. They are places full of strangers, and this is what makes them undesirable. Nevertheless, the density on its own is not the only cause of the security issue. If security could be attained by solely spreading out people, one could not understand Los Angeles endemic safety problems.¹⁶²

Jacobs addresses the issue of safety - or the lack thereof - in cities from the use of streets and sidewalks. A city street that is capable of accommodating strangers and of transforming their presence into a source of safety, as is consistently the case in successful urban neighborhoods, must possess several essential characteristics. First, there must be a clear and unmistakable separation between public space and private space. These two realms cannot blur into one another, as often happens in suburban environments or in large-scale housing projects, where ambiguous spatial boundaries undermine responsibility and surveillance.

Second, the street must be subject to continuous observation. This observation comes from what Jacobs describes as the street’s “natural proprietors”: the people who live, work, or conduct daily activities along it. For this to occur, buildings must be oriented toward the street. They must face it with windows, doors, and active uses, rather than turning away from it or presenting blank *façades* that leave the street effectively unobserved. A street lined with

¹⁵⁹ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, p. 7.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-48. The author compares Los Angeles to African safaris, for in both scenarios one has to remain in its car to be safe.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 32. While Los Angeles and its peculiarities will be covered in greater detail in the next chapter, it is worth noting that when Jacobs wrote her book, Los Angeles had a rape rate twice as high as that of St. Louis and Philadelphia and three times as high as Chicago’s. As for aggravated assault, Los Angeles had a rate higher than other major American cities.

buildings that ignore it becomes vulnerable precisely because no one is positioned to see what happens there.

Third, sidewalks must be used with reasonable continuity. A steady presence of people serves two related purposes: it increases the number of effective eyes on the street and encourages those inside adjacent buildings to pay attention to what is happening outside. People are naturally drawn to watch activity; few find pleasure in observing an empty street, but many derive enjoyment simply from looking at street life. This casual observation is a key component of urban safety.

In smaller and more homogeneous settlements, social control often operates through informal mechanisms such as reputation, gossip, shared norms, and social sanctions. These mechanisms can be effective where people know one another and information circulates quickly. City streets, however, face a far more complex challenge. They must regulate not only the behavior of residents, but also that of visitors - often from suburbs or smaller towns - who come precisely to escape the informal controls of their home communities. As a result, urban streets must rely on more direct and visible forms of regulation embedded in their everyday functioning.

That cities are able to manage this challenge at all is remarkable, and in many cases they do so with great success. Attempts to bypass the issue of street safety by focusing instead on protected interior spaces - such as courtyards or playgrounds - are ultimately misguided. By definition, streets are the primary sites where strangers circulate, and therefore they must fulfill the task of managing that circulation. Streets must not only protect residents from predatory behavior, but also safeguard the many ordinary, well-intentioned strangers who pass through them. No one can realistically live their life entirely within controlled or artificial environments. Everyone must, at some point, use the streets. At a basic level, the objectives appear straightforward: to ensure that public spaces are clearly defined as public,

with no confusing overlap with private or residual spaces, and to provide these spaces with continuous surveillance. In practice, however, achieving these conditions - particularly continuous surveillance - is far from simple. People cannot be forced to use streets they have no reason to use, nor can they be compelled to watch streets that do not interest them.

Although the idea of safety through mutual surveillance may sound oppressive in theory, in reality it functions quite differently. Street safety works best, and with the least hostility or suspicion, in places where people are voluntarily using and enjoying the street, often without being consciously aware that they are contributing to its regulation. The fundamental requirement for this kind of casual surveillance is a sufficient concentration of shops and public places distributed along the sidewalks of a district, especially those that remain active in the evening and at night. Businesses such as stores, bars, and restaurants contribute to street safety in several interconnected ways. First, they provide concrete reasons for both residents and strangers to use the sidewalks they face. Second, they draw pedestrian traffic past stretches of street that might otherwise lack intrinsic attractions, thereby populating them as routes to other destinations. This effect is spatially limited, which means that such enterprises must be relatively frequent if they are to animate an entire district. Moreover, a diversity of establishments is necessary to encourage people to cross paths in multiple directions.

Third, shopkeepers and small business owners typically have a strong interest in maintaining order. They are particularly sensitive to vandalism, theft, and anything that might make customers feel unsafe. When present in sufficient numbers, they become effective watchers and informal guardians of the street. Finally, the activity generated by people running errands or seeking food and drink becomes an attraction in itself, drawing still more people to the street. The simple fact that people are drawn to observe other people is something that many planners and designers have historically failed to recognize. Contrary to

assumptions that urban dwellers seek emptiness, order, and quiet, city life repeatedly demonstrates a widespread enjoyment of activity, movement, and social presence.¹⁶³

According to Jacobs, what is positive about cities is that they offer variety. Variety and diversity happen because of the density inherent to cities. Therefore, apart from the traditional retailers present in cities and suburbs alike, cities have a higher concentration of ethnic restaurants, “mom and pop shops”, and art galleries. Jacobs attributes the diversity to the fact that “in cities so many people are so close together, and among them contain so many different tastes, skills, needs, supplies, and bees in their bonnets”.¹⁶⁴

Nevertheless, diversity does not generate automatically. Indeed, Jacobs identifies four main factors. First, an urban district - and as many of its internal sub-areas as possible - must perform multiple primary functions, ideally more than two. This functional diversity is essential in order to attract people who use the area at different times of day and for different purposes. The overlapping presence of workers, residents, visitors, and consumers ensures a continuous flow of activity and promotes shared use of urban facilities and public spaces. Such temporal and functional overlap is a key condition for sustaining urban vitality and social interaction.

Second, the physical layout of the district must be characterized by short blocks. Streets should offer frequent intersections and multiple opportunities to change direction, thereby increasing permeability and encouraging pedestrian movement. Short blocks multiply routes, intensify street life, and enhance informal surveillance, all of which contribute to a more dynamic and socially engaged urban environment.

Third, the district should contain a mix of buildings that differ in age, condition, and form, including a substantial proportion of older structures. This diversity in the building stock generates variation in economic returns, since older buildings typically require lower

¹⁶³ Ibid., pp. 35-37.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 146-147.

rents and can therefore accommodate a wider range of uses and users. Such mixing must occur at a fine-grained scale, rather than through large, homogeneous zones, in order to support economic diversity and innovation.

Fourth, there must be a sufficiently high density of people within the district, regardless of the specific reasons for their presence. This includes, crucially, a dense residential population. Concentration of people is necessary to sustain local services, generate continuous street activity, and support the complex interactions that give urban districts their social and economic vitality. Density, in this sense, is not merely a demographic condition but a functional requirement for successful urban life.¹⁶⁵

While not the only necessary condition for diversity, a dense concentration of people is always a condition for diversity. The fact that different urban districts with comparable densities have different levels of diversity is the ultimate proof. As a matter of fact, other components and socioeconomic forces come into play. All in all, low density does not foster diversity, nor does extreme density. According to Jacobs, an “in-between” density would be optimal.¹⁶⁶

The conditions explained by Jacobs attracted intellectuals and the Yuppies, the new Young Urban Professionals working in the FIRE sectors (Finance, Insurance and Real Estate). There is an effort by the gentrifiers to identify themselves with what preceded them, namely the working-class of the inner city. This results in a reconciliation between landscape and vernacular, and market and place. According to Zukin, the “gentrifier’s capacity for attaching themselves to history gives them the license to ‘reclaim’ the downtown for their own uses”.¹⁶⁷

One prime example of gentrification is what happened in Harlem. In the 1980s, Harlem was prone to gentrification because of its location - namely the fact that it was and is

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 148-151.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 212.

¹⁶⁷ Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power*, pp. 192-195.

close to one of the highest rent districts in the country and world - and, at the same time, its consistent disinvestment led to low rents and low land values.¹⁶⁸ Harlem had always been the frontier for white pioneers. In the 1920s, when prohibition was the law of the land in the United States, many middle to upper class white New Yorkers went to Harlem to party and consume illegal alcohol.¹⁶⁹

Gentrification is not limited to the big cities. Indeed, smaller working-class cities like Pittsburgh, PA, and Hoboken, NJ, have experienced gentrification.¹⁷⁰ Hoboken is the birthplace of baseball and Frank Sinatra. As a matter of fact, Frank Sinatra's birthplace has been demolished to erect luxury condos.



Figures 23 and 24. Downtown Burlington, Iowa.

This shifting, post-industrial urban landscape of gentrification was very apparent to me, for I had noticed it first hand while travelling across America. The leaves were falling while I drove into the city of Burlington, Iowa. This small city on the banks of the

¹⁶⁸ Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, pp. 143-144. For more in-depth analysis on gentrification in Harlem, please see Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, pp. 140-155.

¹⁶⁹ Lisa McGirr, *The War on Alcohol. Prohibition and the Rise of the American State*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2016, pp. 110-113.

¹⁷⁰ Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, pp. 37-38.

Mississippi river once was a manufacturing city producing farm equipment. I remember I immediately noticed the presence of industrial buildings in its downtown. Some of them were empty, others active. Nevertheless, these buildings did not house factories anymore. Some of them were converted into apartment complexes - as has been done with the Hotel Burlington -, while others housed coffee shops, pizza parlors or fancy restaurants. While Burlington residents still have to travel to the western section of the city to enjoy a vast variety of restaurants, grocery shops and stores, downtown Burlington is a vibrant, liberal pocket inside the state of Iowa, focused on urban renewal and valorization of already existing landscapes.

In conclusion, the crime and revanchist city - the outcome of the fight between the wealthy urban pioneers and the existing, poor urban population - eventually pushed everyone out. It brought suburbanization to the extremes. Indeed, suburbanization and gentrification have always been interconnected.¹⁷¹ Although gentrification has often been interpreted as a sign of a renewed centrality of the inner city, its rise has not resulted in a slowdown or reversal of suburbanization. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that suburbanization has continued unabated, and in many respects has been structurally reinforced. The expansion of gentrified urban cores did not displace suburban development; rather, both processes unfolded simultaneously, driven by the same dynamics of capital mobility and urban restructuring.

Throughout the late twentieth century, suburbanization remained the dominant spatial expression of metropolitan growth. While selective reinvestment in central cities attracted capital, middle- and upper-class residents, and high-value services, this process did not undermine the broader centrifugal movement of urban functions. Instead, it coexisted with, and in some cases facilitated, the further development of suburban areas. Suburbs increasingly absorbed economic activities that had traditionally been concentrated in the

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 40.

urban core, including office complexes, retail hubs, leisure infrastructures, and hospitality services.

This continuity of suburbanization did not simply reproduce earlier patterns of low-density residential expansion. Rather, it laid the groundwork for a more intensified and complex suburban form. The decentralization of key urban functions contributed to the emergence of highly integrated suburban nodes, capable of functioning as autonomous centers of accumulation. These developments culminated in the rise of so-called edge cities, which represent an exacerbation rather than a negation of suburbanization. By concentrating employment, consumption, and services within suburban territories, edge cities amplified the suburban logic while simultaneously appropriating features traditionally associated with central cities.

In this sense, gentrification should not be understood as a counterweight to suburbanization but as part of a broader metropolitan restructuring in which suburban expansion remained the most powerful force shaping urban space. The emergence of edge cities marks the point at which suburbanization was not merely sustained, but reconfigured and intensified, confirming its central role in the geographical transformation of the contemporary metropolis.

Chapter 4: California Dreaming?

The last quarter of the twentieth century cannot be considered florid for the United States. On the international stage, the Arab oil embargo of 1973 and the debacle in Vietnam made Americans realize that even a global power can be vulnerable. While the spirits rose high again after the collapse of the Soviet Union - meaning the United States won the Cold War -, they have been ultimately shattered by the tragic terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. For suburban, car dependent Americans, the oil embargo meant that oil and energy, which had hitherto been taken for granted, were not. For the first time, Americans realized the dangers of a fuel dependent lifestyle. The two oil price hikes of 1973 and 1978 by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) resulted in long lines at the gas station, recreating a situation of insecurity similar to that of the Great Depression some 40 years prior. Back then, insecurity concerned food and jobs, whereas in the 1970s it concerned the fuel to put into an American's most prized possession: the car.¹⁷²

On the domestic arena, the issues are more complex and diverse. From the social standpoint, the AIDS epidemic, the rising crime rates, the spreading issues of homelessness and the revanchist city contradicted the promise President Goerge H. W. Bush made for a "kinder, gentler nation". While the issue of the revanchist city has been covered in the previous chapter, and despite the influx of capital deriving from gentrification, the increasing danger of the city reinforced the anti-urban bias of American life. The result is that Americans felt more and more insecure in dense environments, and the longing to escape from the urban peril was greater.¹⁷³

Moreover, America was undergoing an economic transformation. The processes of deregulation and deindustrialization of the 1980s, combined with the shift from mass

¹⁷² Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, pp. 297-299.

¹⁷³ Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, pp. 44-45.

production to segmentation, resulted in the decline of entire regions in the United States and the overall impoverishment of the working class across the country.

The two hardest hit sectors were the automobile and steel and coal manufacturing. Detroit's fortune was already declining when the Arab oil embargo hit. While American manufacturers took pride in their big, gas-guzzling cars, Japanese automakers entered the American market with smaller, fuel-efficient cars. Over time, they gained a reputation for reliability, and the American automobile industry lost competitiveness. This resulted in a lower demand for jobs, preferring seniority over entry level positions, whose applicants were more often than not unskilled African Americans. Once the car plants resized, all businesses that supplied the plants vanished or had to resize themselves. Suburban neighborhoods decayed quickly. Single family homes inhabited by the working class were boarded up and abandoned. The result was a poverty-laded, crime-ridden city, whose renaissance is yet to be seen.¹⁷⁴

On the other hand, steel and coal suffered from globalization and the industrialization that followed. The shift from a production economy to a service economy meant that the United States could give up its domestic steel production and coal extraction. Moreover, the foreign countries that entered the market at the end of the twentieth century could produce and export goods at a cheaper price, thus rendering American steel less competitive. In addition, the beginning of green policies aimed at finding alternative sources of energy found alternatives to coal. Little by little, American steel plants and coal mines closed down, leaving behind poor communities and joblessness. One of the most important examples is the area in the Ohio Valley around Weirton, West Virginia. Once a booming steel production plant, it is now a shadow of its former self. Just across the river, in Steubenville, Ohio, the furnaces are abandoned. When I visited Steubenville in April, the town was deserted and

¹⁷⁴ James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere*, pp. 190-199.

erie. A mural depicting singer Dean Martin, born in Steubenville in 1917, stood on a Starbucks wall in a stripmall, showing a town so depressed that it is not even willing to capitalize on its most famous resident. What happened in Weirton and the surrounding area happened across the Rust Belt in the American Midwest.¹⁷⁵



Figures 25 and 26. View of St. Louis, Missouri, across the Mississippi river from East St. Louis, Illinois, a symbol of industrial decadence.

While only some of the aforementioned issues contributed to gentrification, all of them instilled an even deeper sense of uncertainty in American life. The city became ever more troublesome and Americans decided to avoid it altogether as much as possible. Americans living in the suburbs wanted to remain in the suburbs for their everyday shopping and to work, without taking the risk of going downtown.

As a consequence, the suburbs began transforming. They were not just a place where commuters slept. They became places of business, of work and pleasure. Ultimately, they eliminated the need to go downtown altogether. For the suburbanite, this transformation had only advantages. To begin with, the commute from their house to their workplace was

¹⁷⁵ Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power*, pp. 66-77.

significantly reduced, which meant that suburban residents were saving both time and money, an important factor after the oil crisis scare. Then they could avoid going to the dangerous downtown, plagued by the issues of homelessness and drug abuse. They could build a safe, worry-free life in the suburbs.

To achieve that, the new frontier of urban sprawl created the edge node and the fringe city. The edge node is a cluster of business, retail and entertainment located on the edge of a city, creating an alternative to the central business district. It is the heir of the strip mall and the shopping mall of the 1950s. An example of an edge node is King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. Located at the intersection between U.S. Route 202, the Pennsylvania Turnpike and Interstate 76, it encompasses shopping malls, restaurants, offices and hotels, recreating the downtown experience without the sidewalks. Indeed, a car is mandatory to get around the edge nodes.¹⁷⁶

Around the edge nodes, the rural fringes started to develop. This setting was right in the middle between the suburbs and the rural, alternating between farms and new developments. Fringe development quickly eroded both farmland and woods, and it reduced wildlife due also to the water pollution caused by septic tanks and garden pesticides. According to Dolores Hayden, the fringe was seen as the rejection of both the industrial city and the crowded suburb. People relocated among nature, on coastlines or near country roads. Residents on the fringes wanted to avoid the dangerous city while still being close to a small, rural town they could take pride in. Some of them, especially young people, moved to the fringes because land was cheaper there. Therefore, they were willing to commute by car multiple hours a day to save money on their mortgages. For instance, after the rise of the computer industry in the Silicon Valley, the suburban area of San Carlos near San Jose had an average home price of \$680,000, whereas 60 miles east in Tracy, an agricultural fringe,

¹⁷⁶ Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, pp. 172-175.

homes averaged a price of \$225,000. Of course, this entailed a commute, but many found it worth it. Some fringes become so exclusive that writer Joel Kotkin calls them “Valhallas”. These are existing communities with attractive natural landscapes such as Jackson Hole, Wyoming or Nantucket, Massachusetts. Due to the location of the fringe developments, all houses needed to account for plenty of garage space. In a family of four, assuming an average garage size of 200 square feet per car and 4 cars per family, the allotted garage space amounted to the size of a Levittown’s Cape Cod.¹⁷⁷



Figure 27. Fringe development near Washington Dulles Airport, Virginia.

American urbanist Edward Soja refers to this development of the suburbs into fringe cities as “postsuburbia”. He states that fringe suburbs have quit being just a commuter place and have become a city in their own right. Quoting Joel Garreau, who wrote the book *Edge City* in 1991, an edge city has important defining criteria, namely “five million square feet or more of leasable office space [...]; 600,000 square feet or more of leasable retail space - the equivalent of a fair sized mall; has more jobs than bedrooms; is perceived by the population

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 181-192.

as one place; and was nothing like “city” as recently as thirty years ago”. Most importantly for this work, Garreau states, among other praises of the edge city, that it is “the search of Utopia at the center of the American Dream”. Furthermore, Garreau stated that “Americans are creating the biggest change in a hundred years in how we build cities. Every single American city that is growing, is growing in the sense of Los Angeles, with multiple urban cores. These new hearths of our civilization - in which the majority of metropolitan Americans now work and around which we live - look not at all like our old downtowns. Buildings rarely rise shoulder to shoulder. Instead, their broad, low outlines dot the landscape like mushrooms, separated by greensward and parking lots”.¹⁷⁸

Indeed, Los Angeles is the prime example of this new development of the American city. Los Angeles was founded in 1781 as the Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles de Porciuncula, but for much of the nineteenth century it remained a relatively small and peripheral settlement. Its geographical position, separated from the main centres of population and economic activity of the United States by considerable distances and difficult terrain, initially limited its development. The transformation of Los Angeles into a major metropolitan area began only toward the end of the nineteenth century, when a combination of transportation improvements, agricultural development, access to water, migration, land speculation, and industrialization fundamentally altered the region.¹⁷⁹

The first major transformation followed the establishment of reliable connections with the rest of the country. Railroad links reached Southern California during the 1870s and 1880s, overcoming much of the region's previous geographical isolation. At approximately the same time, technological improvements in irrigation made it possible to exploit groundwater and transform large areas of otherwise dry land into productive agricultural territory. The Los Angeles region proved particularly suitable for citrus cultivation, and

¹⁷⁸ Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis*, pp. 243-246.

¹⁷⁹ Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias*, p. 158.

irrigated fields and orchards progressively replaced the landscape of cattle ranches that had characterized the area. Agriculture therefore became one of the foundations of the region's early economic expansion.

Agricultural development was accompanied by the discovery of petroleum, the expansion of the railroad network, and the construction of port facilities. Los Angeles increasingly emerged as a strategic centre within Southern California. The development of the harbour at San Pedro and the expansion of Long Beach strengthened the region's connection with national markets, while the railroad transformed Los Angeles into the southwestern terminus of an increasingly integrated transportation system. These developments stimulated one of the first major population booms in the region during the 1880s, attracting migrants from the Midwest and other parts of the United States. The newcomers were often not simply seeking employment, but also a different environment and a more comfortable way of life.¹⁸⁰

This combination of economic opportunity, favourable climate, abundant land, and aggressive promotion gave rise to a distinctive culture of growth. Land speculation became particularly important. Real estate developers and local boosters promoted Southern California throughout the country as a place where agricultural prosperity, healthy living, and suburban homeownership could be combined. Los Angeles was increasingly presented not simply as an existing city, but as a place whose future could be created through investment and development. By the end of the nineteenth century, the region had already begun to acquire the characteristics that would later distinguish its metropolitan landscape: rather than expanding exclusively from a dense urban core, development occurred through the multiplication of settlements across the wider Los Angeles Basin.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

The geographical organization of this early expansion was strongly influenced by transportation. Henry E. Huntington played a particularly important role in the development of the Pacific Electric railway system. Rather than simply connecting already established settlements, the railway became closely associated with real estate development. Huntington and other developers acquired land along proposed routes and promoted new residential communities that could be connected to downtown Los Angeles by streetcar. Developers sometimes subsidized railway services because accessibility increased the value and marketability of surrounding land. Transportation and real estate development were therefore mutually reinforcing: railways opened new areas to settlement, while the development of those areas created additional demand for transportation.¹⁸²

The resulting streetcar suburbs differed significantly from those of many older American cities. In cities in the East and Midwest, streetcar lines often extended outward from already developed urban areas into relatively distant suburbs. Los Angeles developed under different geographical conditions. The central city was comparatively small, while the surrounding landscape contained large quantities of undeveloped or agricultural land. Streetcar lines could therefore travel considerable distances through a relatively open landscape, allowing residential development to occur far from the existing urban centre. As a result, the relationship between transportation and urban expansion was not simply one of extending the existing city outward: the transportation network actively enabled the creation of new settlements across the metropolitan region.¹⁸³

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Los Angeles was consequently already developing in a decentralized manner. New residential communities appeared along railway lines, while the metropolitan population was distributed among numerous municipalities and settlements. The region did retain a recognizable downtown, which concentrated

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 159.

¹⁸³ Ibid., pp. 160-161.

governmental, financial, commercial, and social functions. Yet this centrality coexisted with a relatively dispersed residential and industrial structure. The city was therefore not organized simply as a compact centre surrounded by progressively lower-density rings. Instead, a network of settlements began to emerge around a relatively small central core.

The rapid multiplication of municipalities illustrates this process particularly clearly. Between 1870 and 1900, numerous new municipalities were incorporated throughout the Los Angeles region. Some developed along railway lines, while others emerged around agricultural, industrial, or coastal locations. The result was what Soja describes as a form of polycentric sprawl that was already visible by the end of the nineteenth century. An east-west sequence of settlements developed along railway routes, while other communities expanded westward toward the Pacific and southward toward Long Beach and Orange County. Thus, the metropolitan territory was becoming populated through multiple nodes rather than through the continuous outward expansion of a single urban settlement.¹⁸⁴

Several economic activities contributed to this spatial differentiation. Agriculture remained important, particularly in the early decades, while petroleum production created additional centres of economic activity. Industrial development gradually expanded as well. By the early twentieth century, Los Angeles had become an important petroleum-producing region and was developing a diversified industrial base. The expansion of the port complex further strengthened the southern part of the metropolitan area, while industrial and commercial activities increasingly appeared outside the immediate downtown area.¹⁸⁵

The expansion of the urban territory was also facilitated by the political geography of the region. Los Angeles increasingly incorporated surrounding territories, extending its municipal boundaries toward the port, Hollywood, and the San Fernando Valley. Between the beginning of the twentieth century and the 1930s, the city's territory expanded dramatically.

¹⁸⁴ Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis*, p. 123.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

Yet municipal annexation did not eliminate the fragmented character of the wider metropolitan area. Numerous independent municipalities remained outside the boundaries of the City of Los Angeles, contributing to a metropolitan structure in which different local governments coexisted within an increasingly interconnected urban territory.¹⁸⁶

The development of affluent residential districts further reinforced this spatial differentiation. During the early twentieth century, wealthy residents increasingly moved toward attractive locations in the hills and along the coast. Beverly Hills provides one of the clearest examples. Originally developed as an exclusive residential suburb, it was planned around spacious streets, landscaped surroundings, and relatively low-density housing. Similar developments subsequently appeared along the Santa Monica Mountains and the Pacific coast, including Westwood, Brentwood, Pacific Palisades, and Malibu. Comparable affluent suburban development occurred in the foothills around Pasadena, San Marino, and Arcadia, as well as on the Palos Verdes Peninsula.¹⁸⁷



Figure 28. Sunrise in Los Angeles seen from the Griffith Observatory.

¹⁸⁶ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, pp. 194-195.

¹⁸⁷ Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias*, p. 168.

These developments reveal an important characteristic of Los Angeles' suburbanization: the suburb was not simply an outer residential ring surrounding a central city. Different suburban environments emerged in different geographical locations and were associated with different social groups and economic functions. Some were planned as exclusive residential communities, while others developed around industrial or commercial activities. The physical geography of the region - its coastline, mountains, valleys, and extensive open land - made it possible for residential development to spread across a very large territory.

The expansion of housing was accompanied by the decentralization of commercial activity. One important example was the development of the Miracle Mile and the emergence of Wilshire Boulevard as a new commercial axis. In the 1920s, department stores began moving away from the traditional downtown centre and locating along Wilshire Boulevard, where large stores could provide parking and direct automobile access. This represented an important change in the relationship between the urban centre and its surrounding territory. Retail activity no longer needed to remain concentrated in downtown Los Angeles. Instead, new commercial centres could develop along major transportation corridors and serve residents living in the surrounding suburbs.¹⁸⁸

The automobile accelerated this process. Los Angeles had already developed extensive streetcar suburbs, but the rapid increase in automobile ownership during the 1920s provided a fundamentally different form of mobility. Unlike mass transit, which concentrated development along specific corridors, the road system allowed movement between a much larger number of locations without requiring travellers to pass through a central node. This increased the geographical range within which residential, commercial, and industrial

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 170-171.

activities could be located. The automobile therefore reinforced a form of urban expansion that was already present rather than creating decentralization from nothing.

The consequences were visible in everyday patterns of mobility. By the 1920s, Los Angeles was already among the most automobile-oriented cities in the United States, and traffic congestion was becoming a major problem despite the region's enormous spatial extent. The paradox was that a city characterized by abundant space could nevertheless experience severe congestion because large numbers of residents still travelled toward the central areas for employment and specialized shopping. The transportation system therefore had to evolve once again.

During the 1920s, a debate emerged over the future of transportation. One option was to strengthen mass transit through an expanded system of elevated railways and subways. Such a system would have continued to organize development around transportation corridors and would have reinforced the importance of central Los Angeles. The alternative was a large-scale road system. The latter option ultimately prevailed. In 1926, Los Angeles voters approved a major bond issue for road construction, while proposals for a new central rail and trolley station were rejected. The subsequent decline of the Pacific Electric system further strengthened the role of the automobile.¹⁸⁹

The significance of this decision went beyond transportation policy. A road network connecting a vast number of locations directly encouraged a different spatial organization of metropolitan growth. Rather than requiring movement through a central hub, the road system allowed travel between peripheral locations. The resulting pattern supported the further decentralization of residential development and commercial activity. In this sense, transportation infrastructure became an instrument through which the dispersed geography of Los Angeles could expand across the entire basin.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 173-174.

Real estate development was closely connected to this process. During the 1920s, subdivision became one of the most important mechanisms through which the region's landscape was transformed. Developers could purchase large areas of relatively inexpensive land, construct roads and basic infrastructure, divide the land into individual lots, and sell them to prospective homeowners. The enormous scale of subdivision activity helped convert agricultural and undeveloped land into residential landscapes. In 1923 alone, hundreds of subdivision projects were registered, covering tens of thousands of acres and producing tens of thousands of individual lots.¹⁹⁰

The relationship between transportation, finance, and real estate was therefore crucial. Roads made peripheral land accessible. Subdivision transformed that land into marketable lots, and mortgage finance enabled households to purchase them. Increasing homeownership generated further demand for roads and suburban infrastructure. This created a self-reinforcing process of metropolitan expansion. The growth of the urban territory was not simply the result of households independently choosing to live farther from downtown. It depended on an interconnected system involving developers, financial institutions, infrastructure, transportation, and local governments.

The Great Depression interrupted the rapid pace of growth, but it did not fundamentally reverse the spatial trajectory that had developed during the preceding decades. Indeed, some of the institutional innovations introduced during the 1930s subsequently facilitated a much larger expansion. Federal housing policies, particularly the creation of the Federal Housing Administration, transformed mortgage finance by promoting longer-term, insured mortgages. This made homeownership more accessible and provided developers with a more stable financial environment in which to construct residential subdivisions.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 162.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 172-178.

At the same time, new construction techniques allowed houses to be produced on a larger scale. The subdivision could increasingly be treated as a single development project rather than as a collection of individually constructed properties. Standardized designs, repetitive construction, and economies of scale reduced building costs and accelerated the transformation of vacant land into residential neighbourhoods. The California ranch house became particularly well suited to this environment: relatively simple to construct, oriented toward the automobile, and compatible with the low-density spatial organization of the metropolitan region.¹⁹²

The freeway system represented the next major stage in this process. Planning for limited-access highways developed during the 1930s, and Los Angeles eventually adopted a system designed not simply to connect peripheral communities to downtown, but to connect different parts of the metropolitan region directly with one another. The freeways were therefore conceived as a network superimposed on the existing road system. Their purpose was to make movement possible across the entire metropolitan area without requiring travellers to pass through a single central point.¹⁹³

This transportation structure reinforced the fundamental geographical tendency that had characterized Los Angeles since the streetcar era. The city could continue to expand outward while remaining interconnected. Rather than resolving congestion by concentrating development around a stronger centre, the solution was to increase the capacity for movement across an increasingly extensive urban territory. The freeway thus became an essential component of the dispersed metropolitan form.

World War II and the postwar period greatly intensified these tendencies. Los Angeles entered the war years with an already diversified industrial economy, including petroleum, automobile-related manufacturing, motion pictures, and aircraft production. Federal defence

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

expenditure subsequently transformed the scale of regional industrialization. Aerospace and defence-related activities expanded across a broad territorial area, contributing to the emergence of industrial concentrations not confined to the traditional central manufacturing districts.¹⁹⁴

The postwar boom produced an unprecedented expansion of both population and urbanized land. Between 1940 and 1970, the population of the broader Los Angeles region increased dramatically, while the peripheral counties grew particularly rapidly. The housing boom translated population growth into a landscape of suburban municipalities and residential subdivisions. Nearly sixty new cities were incorporated between 1940 and 1970, adding another layer to an already fragmented metropolitan structure.¹⁹⁵

The postwar expansion therefore did not simply enlarge Los Angeles. It multiplied the number of places that constituted metropolitan Los Angeles. New municipalities, suburban communities, industrial districts, commercial centres, and residential developments emerged across the region. Lakewood, incorporated in 1954, illustrates this process particularly well. It represented a large-scale suburban municipality built around residential development and private provision of services, while other communities developed around industrial or commercial functions. The metropolitan landscape consequently became increasingly differentiated, with different municipalities and districts serving distinct populations and economic activities.¹⁹⁶

Industrialization itself contributed to this decentralization. During the postwar decades, Los Angeles developed a substantial aerospace and defence complex stretching across different parts of the metropolitan area, including the San Fernando Valley, the coastal corridor, and Orange County. Manufacturing, research, electronics, and related services became distributed across a broad territorial network. At the same time, traditional industrial

¹⁹⁴ Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis*, p. 133.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 131-135.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

areas near downtown and the ports continued to coexist with newer industrial concentrations farther from the historic core.

The result by the 1960s and 1970s was a metropolitan region in which residential and employment locations were increasingly separated across space. The traditional downtown remained an important centre of government, finance, and corporate activity, but its relative importance within the regional economy was reduced by the expansion of suburban shopping centres, industrial districts, and other employment nodes. The process was therefore not one of the disappearance of the centre, but of its coexistence with an increasingly extensive network of peripheral centres.¹⁹⁷

This process continued after 1970. Population and employment growth in the outer parts of the region remained substantial, particularly in Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside, and Ventura counties. At the same time, economic activity became increasingly differentiated geographically. Manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade, finance, and other services developed in different parts of the metropolitan region, reinforcing its internal complexity. The result was a form of urbanization in which both population and employment could continue moving outward without necessarily abandoning the metropolitan system as a whole.¹⁹⁸

By the late 1970s, therefore, Los Angeles had become the product of nearly a century of cumulative spatial expansion. Its distinctive form cannot be attributed to a single factor. The initial agricultural development created the economic basis for population growth. Then railroads overcame geographical isolation and streetcars connected newly developed suburbs to the central city. Moreover, real estate speculation transformed peripheral land into residential communities. Automobiles expanded the range of possible movement, while roads and freeways facilitated direct connections between dispersed locations. Ultimately, federal

¹⁹⁷ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Metropolis*, pp. 197-200.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

housing and infrastructure policies encouraged large-scale suburban development and postwar industrialization generated new employment centres outside the traditional core.

What emerged from this sequence was not a simple city surrounded by suburbs, but an increasingly extensive metropolitan territory in which the distinction between city and suburb became progressively less straightforward. Los Angeles had retained a central downtown, but its urban functions were distributed across a much larger area. Residential communities, industrial districts, commercial centres, ports, airports, and other specialized areas were connected by an extensive transportation network and embedded within a fragmented political structure. The historical development of the region thus produced a spatially dispersed metropolitan system long before the emergence of the theoretical approaches that would later attempt to describe it.

The dispersed character of Los Angeles was therefore not an accidental consequence of late twentieth-century growth. It was already visible in the streetcar suburbs of the early twentieth century and became progressively institutionalized through land subdivision, automobile ownership, road construction, mortgage finance, suburban housing, and postwar economic expansion. The streetcar system had already carried suburbanization to an unusually extensive scale before the automobile became dominant, while the later road and freeway systems expanded this principle rather than replacing it. By the middle of the twentieth century, the region had consequently developed a metropolitan geography in which movement, rather than proximity to a single centre, became one of the principal organizing principles of urban life.

In this respect, the history of Los Angeles represents a particularly clear example of how metropolitan expansion can proceed through the multiplication and interconnection of urban spaces rather than through the simple enlargement of a single urban core. From the agricultural settlements and railway towns of the late nineteenth century to the streetcar

suburbs, automobile-oriented subdivisions, industrial districts, and postwar suburban municipalities, the region repeatedly expanded by opening new territories to development. By around 1980, this long process had produced one of the most extensive and spatially dispersed metropolitan landscapes in the United States.



Figure 29. Downtown Los Angeles.

This process saw the exponential growth of the counties contiguous to Los Angeles. While the population of Los Angeles grew by 26 percent between 1970 and 1997, the population of Los Angeles' neighboring counties grew by 120 percent. In the Dallas/Ft. Worth area, which went through a similar development as Los Angeles, the figures are even more significant. In the same timeframe, the Dallas/Ft. Worth area grew by 24 percent, while the contiguous counties grew by 320 percent. This exponential growth confirms the fact that not only was urban sprawl more and more present, but also that edge cities were growing faster than the central metropolitan area around which they were created.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁹ William Clark, "New Urban Forms and Old Paradigms", *A Companion to The City*, edited by Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, Blackwell Publishers, 2000, p. 147.

The dangers - both real and perceived - of the revanchist city, homelessness and drug addiction kept scaring Americans into the suburbs, as far away as they could from these perils. Nevertheless, some felt that not even the suburbs could fully protect them. Therefore, gated communities were established across the country. Gated communities enhanced the sense of security homeowners looked for in the suburbs. Many were afraid of unsafe neighborhoods, uncertain resale values and overdevelopment. Residents of gated communities often benefited from private policing so they could fully enjoy their amenities, such as golf courses or swimming pools.²⁰⁰ In Los Angeles, Mike Davis argues that “the obsession with physical security systems, and, collaterally, with the architectural policing of social boundaries” has become the protagonist of urban life in the 1990s. Remembering the predictions of President Richard Nixon’s 1969 National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, “we live in ‘fortress cities’ brutally divided between ‘fortified cells’ of affluent society and ‘places of terror’ where the police battle the criminalized poor”.²⁰¹ In order to insulate both home values and lifestyles, developments on the outskirts of Los Angeles have become fortress cities, with encompassing walls, restricted entry points, overlapping private and public police and private roadways. In Rancho Palos Verdes, Rancho Mirage and Bradbury, no one can access the suburban neighborhoods without an invitation from a resident.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, pp. 215-216.

²⁰¹ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 200.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 220-221.



Figure 30. Entrance gate for the Sandhill Trace residential community in Hunters Creek, Florida.

The peculiarity of Los Angeles' urban form resulted in a new way of thinking about the city. Scholars and urban planners such as Edward Soja, David Harvey, Mike Davis and Micheal Dear realized that the way cities were developing was different from the Concentric Zone Model of Burgess' Chicago School, but rather Los Angeles was paving a new, postmodern way of urban growth. Together they formed the Los Angeles School of Urban Planning. According to Micheal Dear and Steven Flusty, some of the founders of the Los Angeles School of Urban Planning, while the Chicago School's concept of a city was that of "an organic accretion around a central organizing core", the Los Angeles School sees the postmodern urban process in which "the urban periphery organizes the center within the context of globalizing capitalism now shapes cities". Such processes are similar to a game of keno cards. According to the authors, "on such a card there are numbered grids with some squares being naked in the course of a game while others are not, according to a random draw. Applied to the city, what characterizes postmodern urban structure is the apparently random development and redevelopment of urban land, the outcome of 'exogenous

In his book *Ecology of Fear*, Mike Davis creates a diagram similar to that created by Burgess. The core is represented by a homeless containment zone, surrounded by the inner city, which is dotted by some drug free zones and other narcotics enforcement and prostitution abatement zones. The inner city is then surrounded by blue collar suburbs, with neighborhood watch initiatives and gang free parks. These suburbs are then surrounded by gated, affluent neighborhoods, which in turn border the various edge cities lying on the outskirts of town. Over the edge of the city numerous prisons sprouted like mushrooms, a symptom of the fortress city typical of the end of the twentieth century.²⁰⁶



Figure 32. A neighborhood watch sign in Levittown, Pennsylvania.

It is now important to briefly introduce the concept of postmodern urbanism. David Harvey states that “whereas the modernists see space as something to be shaped for social purposes and therefore always subservient to the construction of a social project, the postmodernists see space as something independent and autonomous, to be shaped according to aesthetic aims and principles which have nothing necessarily to do with any overarching

²⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 364-365.

social objective, save, perhaps, the achievement of timeless and disinterested beauty as an objective in itself”.²⁰⁷ Therefore, the postmodern city is not rationally planned and does not fit a greater purpose. Postmodern buildings often stylistically collide with their neighbors, for they were created by separate influxes of capital.

The tragic terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 sealed the fate of the American city. The worst fears that suburbanites had about the city became true right in front of their eyes. While it would be incorrect to say that everyone left the city, more Americans fled to the suburbs. Those who did not feel safe in the suburbs moved to gated communities, where up to 16 million Americans lived in 2002. The city underwent a process of massive securitization, through which every square inch thereof is either patrolled or monitored by security cameras. Despite all the efforts by city, state, and federal officials, American downtowns and inner cities still remain dangerous. Therefore, the “Town and Country Magnet” is as strong as ever.

²⁰⁷ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Blackwell Publishers, 1990, p. 66.

Conclusion

A group of kids is chasing one of their peers down an alley. Frank Sinatra, who was out of the recording studio, sees the scene and decides to intervene. After talking to the kids, who circled the other kid because he was a Jew, he starts to sing: “What is America to me? The house I live in. A plot of earth, a street. The grocer and the butcher. And the people that I meet. The children in the playground. The faces that I see. All races and religions. That's America to me”.²⁰⁸ This is part of a short movie released in 1945 titled *The House I Live In* aimed at easing racial and religious hate after the end of World War II. It is particularly important for this work, since the writers and producers chose the theme of the house as the title of the movie. The house, the plot of land and the street become some of the most immediate representations of American life: ordinary spaces capable, at least ideally, of bringing together people regardless of race or religion.



Figure 33. Frank Sinatra singing in *The House I Live In* (1945).

²⁰⁸ Frank Sinatra, *The House I Live In*, Library of Congress, 1945.

It is not easy to draw a history of Suburbia from the origins to the present age. Throughout the centuries, suburban housing changed continuously. From the first, individual houses outside of the city to the streetcar suburbs, from the mass-produced houses of the Levittowns to the gated communities, its physical form has never remained entirely the same. Yet its underlying promise has been remarkably persistent: to give families a house on a plot of land, in a safe and spacious neighborhood, where they could build a better life.

The idea of Suburbia has been shaped and influenced by economic, historical, geopolitical, and sociological factors. The level of importance of these components varied in time and space, and created a standardized product that successfully fit into such a big and diverse country.

From the earliest days of America, space and freedom became closely intertwined, and the room provided by the suburbs helped strengthen that connection. Suburbia can therefore be considered an all-American phenomenon, and in many ways a reflection of the individualism of American society. This individualism has both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, it can foster a profound sense of loneliness and separation. Edward Hopper's paintings perhaps capture this tension better than almost any other visual representation of American life. His houses, windows, roads and isolated figures convey not only solitude, but also the peculiar coexistence of freedom and distance that characterizes much of the American landscape. Women, in particular, were often among those who experienced the costs of suburban isolation most strongly. On the other hand, individualism, together with the myth of the "self-made man", reinforced the idea of the pursuit of happiness and the continuous striving toward the American Dream.

My own interest in the United States began long before this research and was shaped by several journeys across the country. Returning to America over the years made me increasingly aware that the landscapes I found so familiar and attractive were not simply a

collection of houses, roads and neighborhoods. They were the visible result of a much longer history. Studying Suburbia changed the way I looked at places I had already seen many times. What once appeared to me as part of an almost instinctively recognizable American scenery gradually became something more complex: a space shaped by migration, economic growth, racial inequalities, changing family structures, political choices and individual aspirations.



Figure 34. Cape Cod Morning by Edward Hopper (1950).

Perhaps this is also one of the reasons why Edward Hopper has always fascinated me. Before studying Suburbia, I was drawn mainly to the atmosphere of his paintings: the light, the silence, the architecture and the sense of suspended time. After travelling through the United States and working on this thesis, I began to see something else in them. The apparent emptiness of a street, a house standing by itself, a person behind a window or the distance between two figures can also be read as part of a broader American tension: the desire for independence and space on one side, and the risk of isolation on the other. Hopper does not offer an explanation of America, but he captures something that I have often felt while travelling through it.



Figure 35. A cool April evening in Jamison, Pennsylvania.

By the time my internship was coming to an end, spring had arrived in Philadelphia. As everyday after work, I made my way back to Suburban Station, ready to catch the next train to Warminster. As always, I looked out of the train window to watch the urban landscape change. I remember the decaying inner city, with people gathered in front of the local deli or liquor store. I remember the veterans memorial in suburban Willow Grove, dedicated to the American heroes, from cities and suburbs alike. And I remember the joy of stepping down from the train in Warminster and driving home on roads surrounded by the beautiful nature of Bucks County. Finally, I remember the beautiful suburban neighborhood where my relatives live. The birds were singing, the golfers were playing their last holes, two neighbors were talking to each other and kindly waved at me as I was driving by. This is Suburbia. It may not be perfect, and it may not have always been fair to all Americans, but it can not be denied that it truly represents the essence of the American dream. At least it does to me.

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