

# City and Suburb: An Overview of Urbanization in the United States

Many factors have affected the development of cities in the United States, such as social, economic, and environmental concerns. Some of these are outlined below.

## 1700–1800

The early economy of the American colonies was based on farming, where individuals owned and controlled their own land. As trade and industry grew, so did cities, like Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. These early cities seemed crowded and dirty compared to the open spaces of the farm. So, even as the size and number of cities increased in America over the next two centuries, the notion of living on one's own land in the country remained a powerful ideal.

Travel in cities was limited by how far people could walk or use animal power to travel, so living close to work and stores saved time and effort. In early cities, homes, stores, and places of employment were clustered together for convenience. Early cities also relied on rivers and waterways for transportation and shipping of supplies between communities.

## 1800–1900

As a result of the Industrial Revolution, cities grew and changed in structure. People moved to cities from farms and from overseas to find jobs in the city factories. City populations increased. Factories filled the air with smoke. Residents and planners became concerned about issues such as air pollution, minimal sewage treatment, and the growing city population.

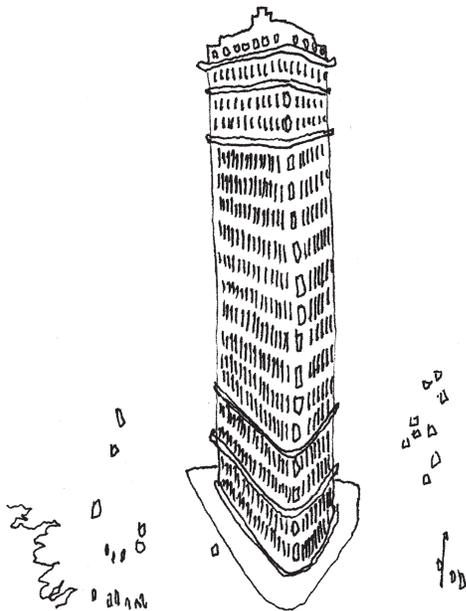
Poorer city residents lived in crowded apartment buildings called tenements. Apartments were usually about 300 square feet with three rooms, and typically housed about seven people. The earliest tenements lacked indoor plumbing and did not have much fresh air circulation. These crowded and unsanitary living conditions often created an unhealthy environment, resulting in high levels of illness among residents.

As a reaction to these concerns, planners looked for solutions by proposing new plans for cities and plans for the newly appearing suburbs, located outside of the city.

Linked to the city by train, these planned communities, allowed some residents to live in a country-like place, away from the city's pollution and disease, but still commute to the city to shop or work. The single-family house, cul-de-sac, and tree-lined curving roads were characteristics of these early suburbs.

Planners also sought to address the growing slums and lack of green space in cities like New York and Boston. Reformers called for park systems that would serve not just neighborhoods but entire cities, as places for all classes to use.

The late 1800's saw the birth of the skyscraper, a building type that has profoundly influenced urban development. With the continued growth of cities, the available land for new buildings was less and less available; the only alternative was to build up. Before the 1880s, buildings of more than a few stories had to be supported by thick brick or stone walls—the taller the building, the thicker the masonry base. In the 1880's two technological advances allowed for the development of the skyscraper: steel framework and safer elevators. Later improvements in steel frame construction meant exterior walls did not have to support the building, allowing architects to build taller buildings and to replace masonry walls with glass. Improvements in elevator safety and performance also allowed buildings to reach greater heights. Taller buildings meant less land being used and greater concentrations of people, thereby creating denser cities and conserving land.



## 1900–1920

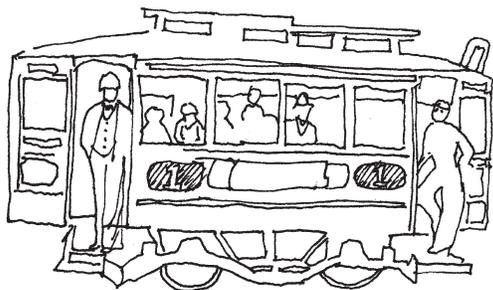
In the early 1900s efforts were made to improve conditions for the poor and reform local government. At the same time, the City Beautiful Movement became a powerful force in shaping cities. It used city beautification—civic art, architecture, parks and open spaces—to instill civic pride and improve the physical condition of cities. The World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, the first economically successful US World's Fair, was seen as an opportunity to highlight the rebirth of Chicago just 22 years after a great fire destroyed the city. The design for the Columbian Exposition, by Frederick Law Olmsted and Daniel Burnham, became the inspiration for the City Beautiful Movement. It made Chicago seem like an ideal place with its classically inspired architecture, formal plan, and monumental buildings. The plan emphasized civic centers, tree-lined boulevards, and public spaces with plants and trees.

Concepts from the City Beautiful Movement were incorporated into the 1901 McMillan Plan for Washington, D.C., which redefined the National Mall as the nation's civic center of monumental architecture and public open space. Other cities followed suit with their own plans inspired by the City Beautiful Movement.

As the City Beautiful Movement reshaped urban centers, the “garden city” model of suburban development proposed a new way to combine features of both the city and the suburb. Developed by writer Ebenezer Howard in response to the pollution in London, England and shaped by ideas in his book *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1902), Howard’s ideal plan included a series of satellite cities, which were connected to each other and a central city by a train system. A green belt around the city would limit city expansion outward and provide areas for recreation. In Howard’s plan the cities would have a limit to the number of residents able to live and work there. He wanted to combine the best features of city and country life. Americans experimented with the Garden City model in the 1920’s and 1930’s.

Another suburban model was the streetcar suburb. With the development of the streetcar in the late 1800s, by the early 1900s streetcar suburbs were growing along streetcar lines leading out of the city. These new communities, developed on small lots and offering one, two, and three-family houses, attracted the middle class with their relatively low-cost housing and easy access to transportation.

Between 1900 and 1920, city planning was firmly established as an orderly way to shape the physical appearance of the city and to direct urban growth. In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed a Public Lands Commission to study and recommend regulations for orderly land development and management.



## 1920–1940

The Standard State Zoning Enabling Act (1922) and the Standard City Planning Enabling Act (1928), both prepared by the U.S. Department of Commerce, formed the basis for zoning laws across the country. These Acts enabled local communities to plan and zone uses within their jurisdiction. Zoning meant predictability—property owners would know what could be built on and, importantly, next to their land. Zoning also created value—land assigned for commercial uses, for example, was seen as more valuable than land assigned for agriculture. Separating uses was also seen as a way to improve people’s health and safety by keeping residential uses away from polluting industries like factories and landfills. Zoning by use would have a profound affect on planning in the 20th century.

By the 1920s, cars were fast becoming an accepted and desired part of American life. As car ownership grew, transit use declined. Driving in the city meant dealing with traffic jams and difficult parking. In the 1920s, planners began to address how cars had begun to affect everyday life. Radburn, New Jersey, for example, developed in 1920s, had separated pedestrian and automobile routes. The 1920’s also saw the first car-oriented shopping centers, which provided off-street parking. The Park & Shop, still in existence in Washington, D.C., was an early example, with parking provided in a lot in front of the strip of stores.

In the 1920s, the members of the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) began to see unchecked expansion of the suburbs or sprawl as a potential threat to the undeveloped natural environment. Members of the RPAA combined the idea of the garden city with the idea of conservation of land to create regional ecological planning. These ideas stemmed from developments in the field of ecology—the study of relationships within natural systems. Planners started to consider how humans could fit, in a balanced way, into these natural systems. Natural systems, like watersheds, often exist across a wide geography that includes multiple municipalities. Lewis Mumford, an historian and writer on science and architecture, promoted the idea of regional ecological planning as a way to balance nature and the built environment across broad areas such as New York State.

Beginning in the 1930s the Federal Government began to play a larger role in planning, mostly through the tool of environmental policies. For example, during the 1930s the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was established with the dual purpose of providing work for the unemployed and converting unused or underused land into forested areas for recreation. The CCC constructed the roads, campgrounds, and trails for many of the local, state, and national parks in existence today.

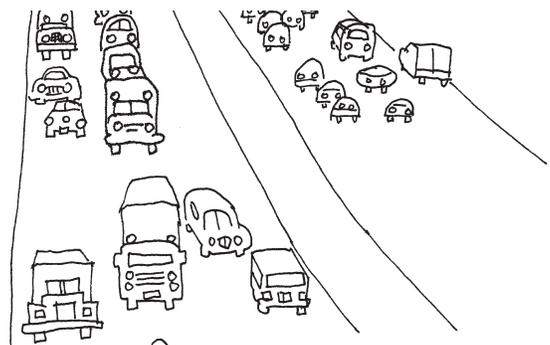
In 1934, during the Great Depression, the federal government passed the National Housing Act and created the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) to support housing development. The FHA insured long-term mortgages by private lenders, making it easier for citizens to borrow money for homes. FHA regulations also provided very low-risk financing to builders of large suburban subdivisions.

## 1940–1960

The 1940s saw more federal acts that continued to greatly affect planning, including the creation of new highways that would move traffic from the city center to the suburbs and the GI Bill, which underwrote mortgages for new homes to returning soldiers for, making the dream of owning your own home accessible to even more people.

A suburban housing boom followed World War II. A strong economy, the growing number of young families, and the desire—and economic ability—to own a home pulled the middle class away from the city. Developers met the demand for new housing with mass-produced large, single-family subdivisions on inexpensive farmland outside the city. New highways put these developments within an easy automobile commute of the city. Levittown, NY and Park Forest, IL, both built in 1947, are early examples of these new developments. By the end of the 1950s, America's suburban pattern of development—shopping malls and office parks serving single-family subdivisions—was firmly established.

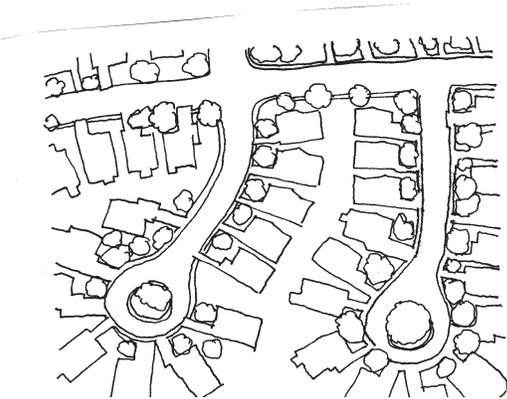
The 42,000 miles of new highways created under the Interstate Highway Act opened up vast amounts of land for development. Construction of highways through cities, together with urban renewal, also accelerated the demolition of urban neighborhoods.



With more people moving to the suburban neighborhoods, many city neighborhoods became run down. The Housing Act authorized the use of federal money to tear down blighted city neighborhoods in order to encourage redevelopment, a process known as urban renewal. Much of the public housing built to replace neighborhood housing was badly designed and poorly maintained, encouraging neglected buildings and crime.

## 1960- 1980

As the suburbs prospered, cities declined. The loss of businesses and the middle class tax base made it difficult for cities to provide services. Urban riots in the 1960s fed the perception that cities were dangerous places. Public transportation could not compete with cars to serve the far away suburbs. Most city streetcars were removed from service by the end of the 1960s, and ridership on the remaining forms of public transit declined.



The 1960s and 1970s saw the growth of sprawl—the unchecked development of rural areas on the edges of urban areas. Sprawl was characterized by the low density of development, long distances between work and home, and a reliance on cars for transportation. This type of plan often led to increased traffic, air pollution, and the loss of open space. Concerns about sprawl were voiced as early as the 1960s and 1970s.

In the 1960s a series of laws and acts were written to set aside and protect land as wilderness areas. The 1970s saw the birth of the modern environmental planning movement. During the 1970s the government became more involvement in environmental issues.

The first Earth Day brought attention to the poor state of the environment. Activists wanted the government to acknowledge that some problems were too big to be dealt with at the city, regional, or state level and needed to be addressed with national solutions.

The federal government began to create national agencies to address and control environmental issues and create national standards to limit pollution.

Economics became a bigger factor in controlling or limiting environmental effects especially from private companies. The federal government began to offer financial incentives to encourage, rather than command, private companies to implement more environmentally friendly practices.

During the early 1970s a sharp increase in the price of oil prompted some people to question our dependence on cars and oil from other countries. Interest grew in improving public transportation, and the federal government began to fund these improvements. In 1964, federal money first became available to improve existing subway systems. A few cities, like Washington, D.C., had the density and potential for growth to support new subway systems. In the 1980s and 1990s, new light rail systems, descendants of the streetcar, began in cities like San Diego, Portland, and Dallas.

## 1980 – 2000

There was a resulting backlash from organizations against government regulations that they thought were too costly, inflexible, and burdensome to private industry.

Development of Smart Growth planning, which considers economics in combination with environmental and planning concerns, allowed for economic and population growth while protecting the environment.

During the 1980s and 1990s “smart growth” evolved as an approach to development that counters some of the effects of sprawl. Its goals include focusing growth in areas of existing infrastructure, creating transportation choices and walkable communities, mixing housing types and uses, and protecting open space. Some local and state governments began using land use policy, tax incentives, and updated planning and zoning tools to promote smart growth.

At the same time the number of Land Trusts was on the rise. A greater number of Land Trusts, non-profit organizations, were being formed to acquire land and conservation easements to help preserve land for natural areas, farmland or forestland.

## 2000 – Present

In the 21st century for the first time in history there are more people living in cities than in villages or rural areas. Urban areas are increasing in size and population. Urban ecological planning looks at the city as a part of an ecosystem and how humans can be a part of the natural ecosystem without negatively affecting it.

New Urbanism, also called traditional neighborhood design, is a design approach similar to the smart growth framework. It is derived from the form and function of traditional American towns. It emphasizes a network of interconnected, narrow streets, buildings set close to the street, walkable neighborhoods, mixed uses, green spaces and transit oriented development as a way to promote better air quality and healthier people.

Today, there is a growing movement for sustainable planning which is a holistic view of city and region. In this view leaders consider environmental, economic and social factors when planning settlements for people.