The Transformation of American Cities
The Reference Shelf

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Preface

After a half-century of economic stagnation and population loss, signs of an American urban renaissance have become evident in the 2010s. Long maligned as dangerous and polluted, cities have in recent years experienced dropping crime rates and are increasingly popular as laboratories for sustainable development. Though the revitalization trend is new and potentially transient, city planners, administrators, politicians, and urban activists are enthusiastically embracing this increase in popularity and promoting cities as vibrant centers for diversity, cultural exchange, and social/political innovation.

What Is a City?

Size matters in cities. While definitions vary, the size and density of a population is one of the primary characteristics dividing cities from towns and villages. According to the United States Census Bureau (USCB), any community with a population of more than 50,000 people is defined as an “Urbanized Area (UA),” while communities with 2,500–50,000 residents are called “Urban Clusters (UCs)” and communities with fewer than 2,500 are classified as “rural.” When the Census Bureau first began distinguishing urban and rural areas, any community with more than 2,500 was considered “urban,” but the subsequent growth of suburbia since the 1950s necessitated new definitions. The Census Bureau’s Office of Management and Budget makes another population distinction between “metropolitan” areas, which are defined by having a “core” urban area with more than 50,000 residents, and “micropolitan” areas, which have urban cores of between 10,000 and 50,000.

In practice, communities with less than 50,000 residents have little in common with America’s largest cities like New York (pop. 8.4 million) or even smaller cities like Raleigh, North Carolina (431,746). Though difficult to define, the urban feel that has come to define “cityhood” in the American imagination is largely a matter of population density. The size and density of the population causes cities to grow vertically, with families and individuals living close together in more diverse communities and a unique aesthetic in the form of the city skylines. Vibrant downtown districts provide urban residents with access to diverse dining, artistic, and recreational options, which in turn inspire more and more new residents to come to cities looking to expand their social, cultural, artistic, and professional experiences through the unique urban milieu. From a qualitative, rather than quantitative perspective, the density and diversity of urban populations gives cities a sense of vibrancy, with an ineffable energy and dynamism that has come to represent the visceral feel of city life.

Another way to define cities is in terms of “importance,” which can be measured in a variety of ways. While cities have long been important in terms of economic influence and as administrative centers for government, cities are also hubs for culture. From the metropolitan art and theater scenes to the numerous linguistic, recreational, and artistic innovations created within diverse urban populations, cities set the tone for cultural development around the nation. Though cities have
changed through decades of growth and decline, the importance of cities as hubs for cultural development has endured, and today, cities are leading a new phase in human culture: the digitization revolution and search for sustainable development that are determining the shape of the next era in both urban and American life.

**History and Development of Cities**

Archaeologists have found evidence of the first "cities" in remnants from the Nile Valley, Indus Valley, and Mesopotamia as early as 7,500 years ago. The ancient city of Babylon, for instance, housed a population of at least 250,000, while ancient Rome (between 400 BCE and 100 CE) had a population as large as 650,000.

The earliest cities were cultural and economic centers, established and developed to facilitate travel and commerce between agricultural centers. Until the mid-1800s, only an extremely small portion of the population, usually estimated at between 4 to 7 percent, lived in cities. The Industrial Revolution, a series of economic and labor developments inspired by new discoveries in manufacturing and technology, drastically changed the demographic environment of the United States. As manufacturing and other industrial jobs became more common in cities, residents flocked from rural areas for work. This growth then facilitated the growth of service industries to provide for growing urban populations. Steam-powered ships and locomotives further fueled the urban boom by making cities more important for shipping and trade.

From the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, urban communities around the world grew faster than rural communities. Population growth and density inspired vertical growth, leading to the first skyscrapers, and also to the characteristic downtown districts and financial districts associated with cities today. Locomotives and steamships, replaced later with gas-powered vehicles, made it possible for corporations to grow to national scale, selling products manufactured in one area to consumers around the country. This growth continued with the popularization of the automobile and the development of interstate highways connecting cities and towns.

In a phenomenon known as the Great Migration, more than 6 million African Americans moved from the rural South to cities in the North, West, and Midwest between 1910 and 1960. This exodus was motivated by the desire to escape racial prejudice in the South and to capitalize on the growth of urban industry around the country. When African Americans moved into these cities, however, they encountered northern prejudice, and racial tension and conflict ensued.

From the end of World War II to 1975, the United States saw the greatest increase in economic growth in history and a rise in the standard of living and overall affluence. At first this money was concentrated in cities, but with the growth of the highway system and the ability of most white families to own at least one car, many people decided to move to the suburbs and pursue the American dream of houses with yards and white picket fences.

The mid-decades of the twentieth century marked a turning point in American urban history. The "deindustrialization" of the United States in the 1970s, when American companies began to move plants abroad, had particularly adverse effects
on cities, which lost good jobs, the tax base, and people. By the 1980s, American cities had lost nearly a quarter of their peak populations, with a subsequent reduction in economic growth as many companies also moved to the suburbs to seek cheaper property and the labor force of growing suburban populations. Ultimately, this transformation led to urban blight, economic stagnation, homelessness, and poverty in urban areas.7

These depressed economic conditions exacerbated racial tensions, and in the 1960s and 1970s, a number of cities, like Cleveland, Detroit, and Newark, experienced urban riots. Racial prejudice and the riots contributed to the mass movement of white families away from American cities into the suburbs, in a phenomenon now called white flight.

Whereas cities were seen as hubs of economic and social opportunity in the early twentieth century, by the 1970s cities were increasingly associated with economic depression and crime. This perception motivated further waves of migration into the suburbs, which in turn increased urban decay. This process continued into the 2000s, with suburban growth outpacing urban growth as individuals raising families continued to move into suburbs seeking safer, cleaner environments or opportunities for employment. Over fifty years, the first suburbs located near city centers became increasingly urbanized and racially diverse, which then stimulated further waves of migration into new suburbs further and farther from city centers.

In the 2010s, cities have begun slowly to regain some of their former economic and cultural prominence. In part, the new wave of urban growth has resulted from young adults in the Millennial generation whose interest in living in city centers has led to an urban renaissance. Demographers have also found that older generations, after having raised children in the suburbs, are returning to cities to benefit from the more diverse cultural and recreational options available in urban environments. Population growth alone also leads to urbanization as more and more residents flock to suburbs, thereby increasing demand for "urbanized" housing options and amenities. Therefore, many formerly quiet, semirural communities on the edges of cities have become extensions of residential and business corridors linked to cities. As of 2015, the U.S. population was growing at a rate of 0.73 percent, with a baby born every 8 seconds, and a population of more than 300 million. As this rapid growth continues, both cities and suburbs become more dense and diverse, essentially leading to a convergence between urban and suburban communities.8

From Blight to Hope

Though crime in American cities has fallen since the 2000s, public perception has not changed in concert, and a majority of Americans still believe that life in suburbs is superior to life in cities.9 Changing this public perception is the difficult job of the politicians, developers, and urban advocates struggling towards urban renewal. Demographic trends indicating an increased interest in urban life show that young Americans increasingly value population and cultural diversity; have more interest in the amenities and recreational options of cities; and are more comfortable with
smaller living spaces, congestion, and the other inconveniences associated with higher density.

Capitalizing on the tastes of a new generation of consumers, cities around the nation are working to change public perceptions, investing in downtown revitalization efforts aimed at showing that cities are the ideal “laboratories” for economic, environmental, and social innovation. For instance, urban governments have promoted technological development in cities while also providing tax and other incentives for entrepreneurs looking to revitalize blighted areas or to fill needed niches in the city’s services and amenities. Small cities like Pittsburgh, once seen as a polluted, blue-collar city with little appeal to young residents, have invested heavily in green infrastructure, shifting urban environments into increasingly self-sufficient communities where individuals interested in environmental activism and sustainable living are beginning to concentrate.10 Larger cities like Chicago and Boston have likewise made major steps toward reducing crime, improving quality of life, and investing in sustainable architecture, power, and other infrastructure.11

In 2015, it remains unknown whether the urban renewal will be lasting or transient. It also remains to be seen whether the resurgence of interest in urban living will dissipate as more and more young adults begin having children. The current state of cities therefore is one of cautious hope, with urban renewal advocates enthusiastically pursuing development, knowing that the next decade could see a return to previous patterns of decline.

Challenges and Changes

In the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution resulted in the massive economic growth of the working and middle classes; in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the Digital Revolution is once again changing urban economies and creating a proliferation of new jobs, this time particularly in white-collar industries. While urban job markets are growing, digital age industries provide fewer job opportunities due to automation in manufacturing, the shift towards digital rather than physical products, and outsourcing. For instance, the newspaper and magazine industries, having shifted to digital formats and shared content, now employ only 10 percent of their former workforce. Currently, there are few effective strategies for creating working-class job growth, especially in cities where the high cost of living and property values complicate efforts to create economic growth. The plight of the American working class is one of the key issues in the struggle to combat poverty, which is a national epidemic that contributes to crime and decay and affects urban and rural populations alike.

Over the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century, economic disparity has grown, and correspondingly, class conflict has become a prominent issue in American politics and especially in American cities. The Occupy Wall Street protest movement provides an example of popular dissatisfaction with economic inequity in American society and the “wealth gap” between the nation’s richest and poorest populations.12 Likewise, cities have become the main locale for the controversial “education reform” movement, as typified by the growth of charter schools.
For contemporary urbanites, and especially those invested in renewal, fostering new priorities around such key challenges as educational quality, economic justice, and environmental sustainability will be crucial to improving the quality of city life for current and future generations.

Micah L. Issitt

Notes

1. Census Bureau, "2010 Census Urban Area FAQs."
5. Frey and Zimmer, "Defining the City," 14–16
7. Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier.
10. Williams, "Why Pittsburgh Is a Front-Runner in Sustainable Development."
11. Eversley, "Hard-knocks Cities are Working on a Comeback."
12. Moyers, "The Great American Class War."