

# A Brief History of Urban Expansion

<http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/habitat/units/un02txt.asp>

**Cities have existed for millennia.** Their fortunes have risen and fallen along with the fate of the civilizations to which they were joined. Some disappeared altogether and are now no more than the sites of archeological digs -- Moenjodaro, in Pakistan, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is one example. Others -- such as Cairo (Egypt) and Beijing (China) -- have been important cities for thousands of years. If not for millennia, then most of today's important cities have at least been around for the past 200 years.



Nevertheless, over the course of human history cities have changed dramatically. To understand how cities developed into what they are today and to explore solutions to the problems they face and possibilities they offer, one must look back to the evolution of urbanization.

## Phase I: River Valley Civilizations

The first phase in the development of cities began around four thousand B.C. Settlements developed along the rivers Tigris and Euphrates in Mesopotamia (present day Iraq), the Nile in Egypt, the Ganges in India, and the Yellow River in China. These have been called the river valley civilizations.

The physical landscape played an important role. The early cities were located on fertile flood plains next to large rivers and had access to pasture land for raising animals. They also benefited from a warm climate and a permanent supply of water.

These conditions were necessary for the transformation to a settled and organized society. They helped settlers domesticate animals such as cattle, sheep and goats, and cultivate cereal crops such as rice, wheat, and maize (corn).

Over time, small and simple settlements grew into larger and more complex centers for a variety of activities, from agriculture to trade to manufacturing. A greater volume of trade and a slowly growing settled population, encouraged labour to become more specialized. Families and individuals dedicated themselves to a specific task or profession, such as shoemaking or trading in grains. This made production more efficient and society more organized, while at the same time providing greater collective security for a city's inhabitants. Consequently, cities flourished and grew in size.

That early shift to an organized, specialized urban environment is one of the important changes in the history of human development. Many known and unknown civilizations followed the early ones, but the pattern of settlement stayed the same through the years, until the Industrial Revolution in Europe changed our methods of production and urban lifestyles.

## Phase II: The Industrial Revolution

*"Unreal city,  
under the brown fog of a winter dawn...*

*Falling towers*

*Jerusalem Athens Alexandria*

*Vienna London*

*Unreal..."*

---T.S. Eliot, The Wasteland

When the American poet T.S. Eliot was writing his famous poem, "The Wasteland", in the 1920s, there was a sense of disillusionment with cities among many writers and artists in Europe and North America.



Eliot and others lived at a time of great change in the development of cities. Before their eyes new sorts of cities were emerging -- cities that were more populated and less familiar than ever before; cities that were at the same time more automated and more chaotic than ever before; cities that were more efficient but also more polluted and

wasteful; cities that offered contact with innumerable people and diverse work opportunities but also caused loneliness, unemployment and poverty.

This new kind of city began to take shape during the second significant stage in urban development, which occurred as a result of the Industrial Revolution (1750-1890) in what are now considered to be the developed countries of Europe and North America.

Two significant factors contributed to the rapid changes in the sizes and lifestyles of cities. **The first factor** was the development of large-scale manufacturing and mining industries which came about as a result of technical advances such as the steam engine, used to drive industrial machinery. Factories and mines required a large labour force, which migrated to the cities from rural areas and sometimes from other countries. As Charles Dickens' novels vividly illustrate, the new urban population did not live in the best of conditions, but the attractions of urban life and the prospect of employment "pulled" people into the city in greater numbers than ever before.

**The second factor** was the expansion of trade routes and access to cheap raw materials acquired through European colonization of other lands. Raw materials fed the industries, but they also created a concentration of wealthy merchants, shopkeepers and bankers who made money trading in goods. The combination of wealth, a large population and a diversity of goods created a market for consumer goods, which slowly evolved into the urban consumer patterns we see today.

### **Phase III: Global urban growth**

What distinguishes the current phase of urban growth from previous ones, is that urbanization is not limited to a specific region. It is now a worldwide phenomenon. Looking at the rates of growth, it would seem that only cities in developing countries are growing fast. But keep in mind that the majority of the population in the developed countries already live in cities.

Towards the end of the 19th century many European and North American cities had very high growth rates, often doubling their size in 20 years. Now, towards the end of the 20th century, many cities in the developed countries have stopped growing, but 75% of the population of those countries already live in urban centers.

By contrast, the highest growth rates today are in the so-called developing world where only 37% of the population is urbanized. However, this is bound to change in the near future. Some cities in the developing world have tripled in size over the past 45 years. In the year 2015, it is estimated that of the ten largest cities in the world only one -- Tokyo -- will be in what is today called the developed world.

The majority of large cities in Asia, Latin America and Africa have been important urban centers for a long time. A few only became important during colonialism when they served as administrative or trading centers for European powers. In either case, the rapid pace of urbanization only took off after the Second World War as the world economy became more global and as colonized lands gained their independence.

Unfortunately, developing countries have limited resources to help new migrants to the cities. With the exception of some countries in East Asia, their economies and industries are not strongly developed, so that unemployment is high and many migrants live in poor conditions in shanty towns and slums.

Urban problems are not confined to the developing world. Cities everywhere have problems of homelessness, drugs, violence and unemployment. Urban growth is not confined to the developing world either. For example, many cities in the south and southwest of the United States, such as Phoenix, are among the fastest growing cities in the world. Urbanization is a global phenomenon.

### **The Future**

It is hard to predict what shape cities will take in the future. In many areas, including in the developing countries, many people are moving out of the city, to nearby areas often called "suburbs". Efficient transport systems such as rail links and highways have enabled people in more affluent cities to live outside the city and travel in, or "commute", to work.

It is predicted that by the year 2025, 61% of the world's population will be urban. However, there could be changes in the world before then. Will people slowly move out of cities? Will computers and the Internet have an effect on how we work and, therefore, on where we live? What will cities look like then?