The Changing Nature of Cities and Urban Culture

Urban models (e.g., Hoyt's sector model, Ibero-American model) tend to emphasize the generalized impacts of economic, technological, and demographic factors on the geography of cities. Behind these influences, however, lie powerful socioeconomic forces that shape the character of particular parts of the city and that influence who lives there. Most urban areas have distinct ethnic neighborhoods. These neighborhoods are primarily the result of the attitudes and practices of dominant groups within cities. The segregation between blacks and whites in many American cities is a case in point.

Sociocultural Influences on Cities

To the degree that there is a correlation between race or ethnicity and class, a similar pattern of population distribution can be found. In the United States, it is possible to find large areas where certain populations live in high-quality housing while other populations live in low-quality housing. This could be observed in the 1920s when the great northern migration of African Americans occurred. Several programs, both official and unofficial, were developed in the northern cities to keep African Americans confined to certain parts of the city in **ethnic neighborhoods**. These practices were finally declared illegal during the administration of Lyndon Johnson and the civil rights acts of the 1960s and early 1970s. It is not correct to say that one ethnic group prefers to live in one sort of housing or one sort of neighborhood. The group's location is a result of when they arrive in the city and what groups are already there, what space is available, and how much individual groups can afford to pay. In most cities, ethnic groups such as the Japanese are not concentrated at all. Other groups, such as Hispanic and Native American populations, are found in striking concentrations in North American cities (e.g., "Little Havana" in Miami). It is also possible to see some specific concentration of gender groups in cities. In recent years, a pattern that has developed is the concentration of largely female single groups in apartment complexes in the suburban or freeway zones or downtown. Still another striking trend is the rise in female-headed households in two types of locations: low-income, single mothers concentrated in cheap housing close to downtown; and middle- and upper-income single parents (notably middle-class divorcees) located close to suburban amenities in areas deemed to be safe.

Far and away the most powerful force in locating groups is their ability to pay for space. This produces general sorting by economic class that characterizes cities all around the world. The wealthy are able to have choices and choose high-amenity locations in comfortable surroundings. The middle-class buy what they can afford, seeking to emulate the landscapes and lifestyles of the high-income populations. People with limited or no incomes are relegated to the lowest-quality housing in the locations with the least desirable features.

Segregation in America and Abroad

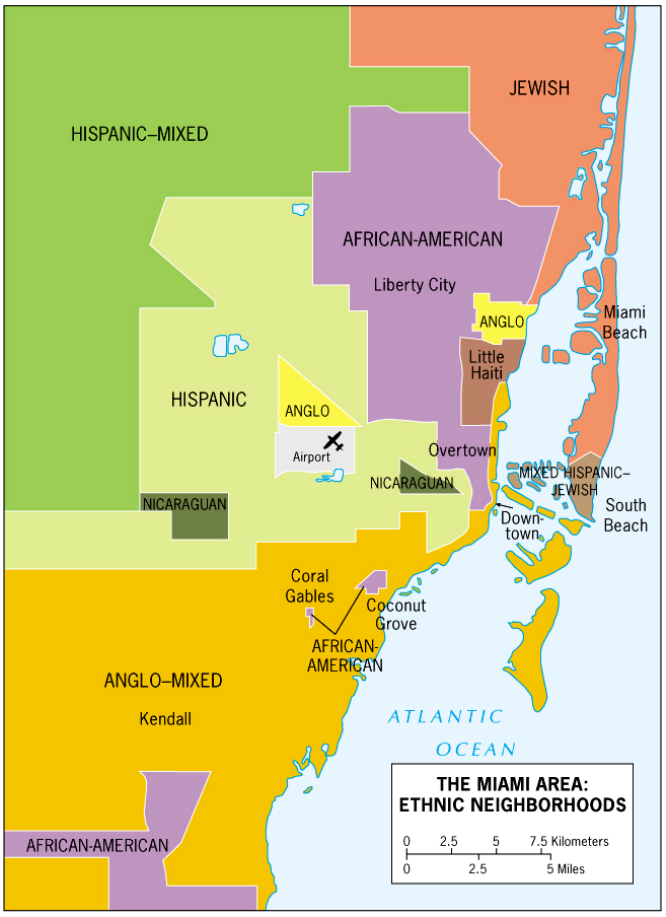
Until the 1960s, there were no significant legal obstacles to racial discrimination with respect to real estate. Some financial institutions would engage in a practice known as **redlining**. They would identify a "risky" neighborhood and refuse to offer loans to those in the districts (marked by red lines on a map). Invariably, this would apply to poorer neighborhoods, and the lack of money would help precipitate a downward spiral in which poor neighborhoods became increasingly rundown because funds were not available for upkeep. Real estate agents contributed to **ghettoization** through a practice known as **blockbusting**. Essentially they would entice an African-American family by offering them a house in a "white" neighborhood at a very low price. After they moved in, efforts would be made to convince the neighboring white population that the neighborhood was going downhill – producing the so-called "white flight" to the suburbs (e.g. Detroit's white population decreased by 1 million from 1950 – 1970). This practice led to a significant turnover in housing, and great profits for the real estate agents. This practice also became very illegal by the 1960s. Realtors would promote **racial steering** by encouraging whites and blacks to look for housing in areas to change ghetto boundaries – and real estate turnover.

Forced segregation occurs when individuals are coerced by majority powers to stay in a certain area (e.g. South Africa's apartheid laws established "homelands" for non-whites). Blacks, predominantly in the southern States of the U.S., were forced to live separately from the whites until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (e.g., separate bathrooms, water fountains, etc.). **Affinity segregation**, by contrast, is when a group of people choose to live with one another without the use of force (very common today). The ethnically diverse imprint of multiculturalism is evident in cities throughout the U.S. in places like "Chinatown" (in many cities including New York), "Little Haiti" (Miami), or the "French Quarter" (New Orleans).

Observers of industrial cities and cities of the mercantile era of the Middle East point out that all these landscapes are also shaped by forces of segregation and separation. Arab cities had clear-cut quarters and divided ethnic groups. Many of these quarters were walled, with gates that were shut at night. As industrial society developed, sociologists argue, there was a need for specialized places of residence because of the need for social status. Because of the increased capacity for production, middle-class people began to dress like upper-class people. The elite realized that they had to withdraw to homogeneous quarters to separate themselves from the status-seeking middle and lower classes. In addition to this social segregation, people have long wished to avoid economic activities that are blighting and unpleasant. Thus, citizens sorted themselves according to wealth and in response to the location of amenities in the landscape.

In addition, the development of new transportation systems changed the relative location of parts of the city. The old core areas, which were developed during the railroad and river transportation eras, were less accessible in the era of automobiles and freeways, whereas suburban areas were more so. As a result, by the end of the twentieth century, manufacturing jobs were more frequently found at the edge of the city than in the core. This produced a mismatch between potential employees among the lower-income population residing in the city centers and the availability of jobs in the suburban development zones.

Ethnic neighborhoods (as opposed to **ethnic islands** which tend to be more rural) are homogenous enclaves within a larger and more diverse cultural context. Many immigrants choose locations that are relatively close to their home base when they seek to become **guest workers** or migrate illegally: Algerians and Moroccans often migrate to France, Turks to Germany, and Cubans to America. Illegal immigrants, like others, tend to cluster in areas where their cultural cohorts live. In recent decades, another kind of immigrant has become a factor in Europe: the **asylum seeker**. Asylum seekers are migrants who claim escape from armed conflict or political persecution as a way to attain legitimacy in the country they have entered.



Cities in the Developing World

Millions of people migrate to cities in along the periphery every year, as most cannot afford to move into wealthier cities. Joblessness, hunger, and desperation make the urban experience something far different, however, from the hopes that impelled most of them to make their fateful move. Their collective impact on the city of their dreams can be devastating. City governments along the periphery do not have the resources to adequately educate, medicate, or police their burgeoning populations, let alone to provide even minimal housing for most. So how do many of the millions of urban immigrants living in the slum-ridden rings and pockets of the poorer world's megacities survive?

Extended families share and stretch every dollar they manage to earn; when one meber of a family has a salaried job, especially when he or she manages to migrate to a Western country, part of his or her income may be sent back home – and becomes the mainstay for those left behind. Hundreds of millions of dollars are transferred this way every year as **remittances** that make a critical difference in the poorer countries of the world. In some instances, **chain migration** occurs, in which the money sent back allows the members of a family to move to new location – one or a few at a time.

Life in Urban America

In 1967, John Borchert recognized four stages in the evolution of the American metropolis: (1) the **Sail-Wagon Epoch** (1790-1830), when transoceanic and coastal trade were by sailing vessels and land connections by wagon; (2) the **Iron-Horse Epoch** (1830-1870), when the steam-powered locomotive brough the early industrial age; (3) the **Steel-Rail Epoch** (1870-1920), when the full impact of the Industrial Revolution was felt; and (4) the **Auto-Air-Amenity Epoch** (1920-1970); driven by the gasoline-powered internal combustion engine. Today we could add a fifth, High Technology Epoch (1970-present), when service and information industries are contributing to an ever-greater dispersal of populations. Note that improving technology – especially with transportation and communication – is key in each of these epochs.

Even as urban **sprawl** (haphazard growth or extension outward, especially along the outskirts of a city) continues and cities are coalescing, residents have left by the urban

cores by the millions and moved to the suburbs. Many of the so-called **inner cities**, the rings and sectors between the CBD and the suburbs, remain problem-ridden zones where city governments, having lost tax revenues as residents moved to the suburbs, are unable to adequately fund schools, public housing, and social services. Drug abuse, crime, vandalism, and other social problems afflict newer areas of the inner city as well as older ones. Even as the rise of the suburbs devastated the commercial core of the city, the downtown area of larger cities still contain many of a city's crucial assets. Great museums, research libraries, world-renowned orchestras, universities, recreational facilities, and other amenities exist in the centers of many American cities. Many of the services that were once exclusively offered in the core of the cities can be performed anywhere in the country due to improvements in technology; especially with respect to telecommunications. The high cost of a downtown location (e.g., land rent) now outweighs the advantages of agglomeration. The movement of firms and companies from the industrialized core to other locations is called **deglomeration**, and it is affecting older downtowns everywhere in America.

Efforts to lure wealthier families and businesses back to the CBD have had some success. One of these steps involves new residential construction in the hope of luring middle and upper-class residents (as well as their taxes and spending) back to the heart of the city. However, the **gentrification** of rundown areas of the inner city has had a greater impact. Gentrification is the rehabilitation of deteriorated, often abandoned inner-city housing with favorable locations relative to the CBD and central-city places of employment. Another program for inner-city revival is the **commercialization** of part of the downtown. Several cities, including New York, Baltimore, Miami, and Fort Lauderdale have created waterfront "theme" areas to attract visitors, and possibly, new residents. "Riverwalk," located in downtown Fort Lauderdale is a contemporary example of commercialization, and an attempt by the city to revitalize the downtown area. The jury is still out on the success of this endeavor, however a positive effect has been the opening of the Las Olas River House, a high-rise condominium, which is a perfect example of gentrification.

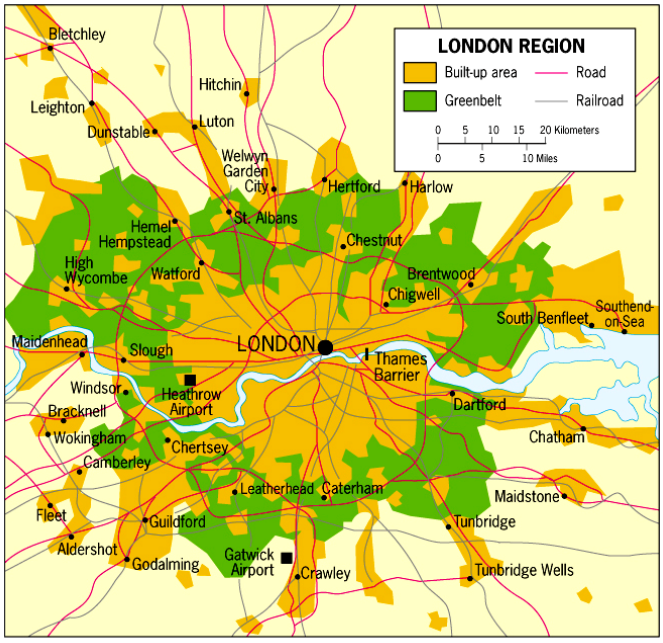

Las Olas River House

Suburbanization holds special interest for human geographers because it involves transformation of large areas of land from rural to urban uses, affects large numbers of people, and rapidly creates distinct urban regions complete with residential, industrial, commercial, and educational components. *Suburbia* has now evolved into a self-sufficient urban entity, containing its own major economic and cultural activities, that is no longer an appendage to the central city (edge cities). The Urban Realms model views today's suburbanized cities as polycentric (multiple nuclei) metropolises consisting of "realms" of activity such as TNC headquarters, telecommunications hubs, and communities of foreigners. No less than 50 percent of the entire American population resides in the suburbs today. This information is substantiated by the U.S. Census, taken every 10 years since 1790. The smallest level of census information is the **Block** – usually the size of one city block. A **Block Group** is a collection of several Blocks. **Census Tracts**, the most commonly used level of information, are at the approximate scale of an urban neighborhood and average about 4,000 inhabitants. Neighborhoods, **municipalities** (a political unit, such as a city, town, or village, incorporated for local self-government), and States may lose funds and power if their census numbers go down, so questions of data accuracy arise. Nonetheless, the last census taken in 2000 indicated that the 1990s were the first decade since World War II in which city populations actually increased overall. This may be a new trend influenced by commercialization and gentrification efforts, or it may be an anomaly – we'll just have to wait until 2010 to gain a better understanding of this information.

Canadian cities are much less dispersed than American cities. Urban population densities are higher; multiple-family dwellings are more common; and most important, suburbanization has not gone nearly as far as it has in the United States. Although not immune to the forces of globalization and the development of world cities, Canadian central cities have retained a larger share of overall economic activity than their U.S. counterparts. Canadian cities do not display the sharp contrasts in wealth that are so evident in American cities. Since more tax payers have remained in the inner city, especially the wealthy, much more money is available for their cities to maintain appearances and functionality. The integration of foreign-born residents, however, has not always gone smoothly in Canada's cities. For example, the Quebecois blamed foreigners for their failed attempt to devolve from the rest of Canada in the 1990s. Violent crime, though much less serious than it is in the United States, also afflicts Canada's cities. Overall, however, Canada's cities have not (at least not yet) developed into competing urban realms.

The European City

European cities are older than American cities, but they, too, were transformed by the Industrial Revolution. Paris (> 9 million), and London (> 7 million), like Rome, Berlin, Madrid, and Athens, are large cities by world standards. These, however, are among Europe's many historic urban centers, which have been affected but not engulfed by the industrial tide. Unlike most American cities, however cities like London are not flanked by a zone of expanding suburbs. The reason for this is the Metropolitan Greenbelt, a zone of



open country averaging more than 20 miles wide that contains scattered small towns but is otherwise open country. This had the effect of containing London's built-up area within its 1960 limits throughout the period of rapid suburbanization in the United States. Although there are some settlements within the greenbelt, suburbanization has had to proceed beyond it – a long train ride away from the CBD. The **greenbelt** phenomenon is not unique to London; many European cities have a version of it. They have limited not only urban sprawl but also suburbanization. Beyond the greenbelt, suburbs are too far away from the CBD for commuting. And since the cost of gasoline is as much as three times higher in Europe than in the United States, people have an added incentive to use rapid transit.


Red Square

The cities of Eastern Europe, many of which are old primate cities, were affected by communist planning that tended to neglect their cultural and historic heritage and attempted to recognize urban life into so-called **microdistricts**. This plan entailed the creation of a huge, dominant square at the center of the city and wide, radiating avenues flanked by ugly apartment blocks. In addition, these microdistricts contained workplaces, schools, recreational facilities, stores, and other amenities either within them or nearby. Thus there was no need for a large CBD, for the districts were supposed to be largely self-sufficient. Neither would there be suburbanization, mass commuting, class contrasts in the neighborhoods, or traffic congestion. Today the cities of Eastern Europe are undergoing still another transformation as glass towers rise above their cities, reflecting the global economy.

Urbanization and the Environment

Only about 25 percent of the world's population lived ion urban settings at the middle of the past century; by the middle of this one, as many as 75 percent may be concentrated in cities. Fewer people in rural areas would seem to be good for forests, wildlife, marginal environments, and soils. Moreover, urban life tends to reduce family size, increase the likelihood that women will receive better education, and improve children's access to adequate health care (e.g., inoculation programs). Some scholars argue that these positives will not outweigh the negatives over time. Their major concerns are:

1. *Hazards of Site:* Millions of migrants moving to urban areas are occupying land that was never intended to be part of the built-up area, and thus expose themselves to landslides, floods, storms, and earthquakes. There is no realistic way to persuade them to leave and no alternate space to relocate them.
2. *Loss of land from Expansion:* Suburbanization in North America and shantytown development in the peripheral megacities encroach on some of the most arable land in their respective regions. In the United States, the process consumes about 1 million acres a year; in China, the total approaches three times as much. Cairo's rapid population growth is also expanding the city's limits into some of the most fertile land along the Nile.
3. *Changed Land Cover:* As cities grow, the natural landscape becomes more cultural: paved roads, parking lots, skyscrapers, etc. All of these factors lead to more runoff of water. Less rainfall permeates downward, and more of it, often with pollutants, washes into streams.
4. *Impact of Pollution:* Rapid growth creates growing volumes of contaminants in the air as well as the water. A pall of smoke hangs over many megacities' shantytowns; places like Mexico City, Delhi (India), São Paolo (Brazil), and Bangkok (Thailand) rank among the world's most smog-ridden.
5. *Production of Waste:* The burning of garbage and automobile exhaust combine to produce some of the most polluted air in the world. In cities such as Manila (Philippines) and Jakarta (Indonesia) people actually live in the waste dumps, looking for salvageable items. A lack of sewer facilities is a growing predicament (affects some 3 million people in Mexico City alone).
6. *Larger Demand for Water:* Urbanization brings with it a higher demand for water. Riverfront cities may contribute to downstream pollution as well as over-consumption of water.
7. *Changing Consumption Habits:* Urban residents also change their diets, their dress modes, their recreation habits, and demand more energy. All these changed behaviors have impacts far beyond the limits of the city. To satisfy growing demand, meat producers need expanded pastures, threatening the very forests where land pressure was supposed to be relieved by the departure of farmers to the city.