4.4: The North American Urban Landscape

North America’s urban landscape has been shaped both by colonization and by industrialization. Most of the early settlements in the region were small and were located close to the eastern coast. The Appalachian Mountains provided a formidable obstacle for early settlers before 1765. As settlement and colonization expanded, people moved steadily westward, still primarily situating close to waterways. Even today, most urban centers are located close to water.

During this time, immigration and natural growth expanded North America’s population. In 1610, the population of what is now the United States, excluding indigenous groups, was a meager 350 people. In just 200 years, the population reached over 7 million. In 1620, just 60 people occupied what is now the Canadian city of Quebec. Today, the population of the United States stands at over 318 million and Canada’s population is over 35 million and both countries are highly urbanized.

North America’s cities themselves have also changed over time. The traditional North American city had a core commercial area, called the central business district (or CBD), surrounded by worker’s homes. Density was generally highest near the city center and decreased as you traveled outward away from the urban center and into the rural areas.

As deindustrialization occurred, suburbanization replaced the previous rural to urban migration. The rush to move to the city center for jobs in industry was replaced by the desire for more land and spacious, single-family homes. With the decrease in housing density and the increase in both home size and acreage, however, came sprawl. Urban sprawl refers to the expansion of human settlements away from central cities and into low-density, car-dependent communities. Sprawl is associated with urban decentralization, the spreading out of the population that resulted from suburbanization. Counterurbanization, the shift in populations from urban centers to suburban and rural settlements, has been prevalent in North America since the end of World War II. In some areas, rural populations have actually grown as a result of counterurbanization. As sprawl continued, edge cities developed. An edge city is an urban area situated outside of the traditional central business district.
In historical North American cities, the central city was home to most of the jobs and services and had relatively high density housing. Because everything was located close to the city center, people could often walk from home to work or take efficient transit systems like streetcars. Urban decentralization has not only resulted in sprawl but has also created suburbs that are entirely dependent on automobiles (Figure \(\PageIndex{1}\)).

![Figure \(\PageIndex{1}\): Suburban Development in Colorado Springs, Colorado (© David Shankbone, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0)](image)

Few suburbs have shops or restaurants, and most people living in suburbs have to commute to work. Since jobs are no longer clustered in the city center, cities have faced challenges trying to develop mass transit systems that tie together numerous disconnected suburban developments and link people with their places of work, many of which are now located in surrounding edge cities.

Toronto, for example, Canada’s largest city, has a population of 2.8 million within its city limits. Its surrounding suburbs, however, have grown considerably in recent decades. The entire metropolitan area now has a population of over 5.5 million and the average daily commute time is over 1 hour. To the south, Washington, DC’s urban decentralization has extended north into Maryland and south into Virginia. Its subway system, a technological marvel when it opened in 1976, has not kept pace with its urban growth and numerous sections of rail lines were shut down for an extended period in 2016 and again in 2019 to conduct major system and station repairs.

In some areas, the metropolitan area has grown so large that it actually overlaps with neighboring metropolitan areas. This is referred to as a megalopolis. The Northeast Megalopolis extends along the Interstate 95 corridor from the southern suburbs of Washington, DC north through Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York to Boston (Figure \(\PageIndex{2}\)). It covers about 2 percent of the land area in the United States but is home to over 50 million people, around 16 percent of the US population. It is projected to grow to 58 million people by 2025. The Northeast Megalopolis is just one of many growing urban areas in North America. The Atlanta Metropolitan area may one day extend into Charlotte, North Carolina. Toronto’s urban development may creep south, intermixing with development in Detroit, Cleveland, and Chicago. Florida may one day become one megalopolis linking the cities of Tampa, Orlando, Miami, and Jacksonville. These massive urban settlements will provide new opportunities for creative housing and transportation planning.
One creative approach to the problem of urban sprawl is New Urbanism, a movement to create urban landscapes with walkable neighborhoods, accessible public spaces, and housing and shops in close proximity. In the United States alone, more than 600 towns and villages have been developed following the New Urbanist principles. Celebration, Florida, for example, near Orlando was designed and built by the Walt Disney Company and includes a variety of apartments and single-family homes in close proximity to shops, restaurants, and a movie theater – all of which are in walking distance for residents (Figure \(\PageIndex{3}\)). In other areas, New Urbanism is more broadly integrated into long-term urban plans. One criticism of New Urbanist developments is that while on the surface, they promote mixed income developments, in practice most housing in these areas are for the middle and upper classes. Housing prices in these developments are simply beyond the reach of many low income families.
As urban to suburban migration continued, some desired instead to move back from the sprawling suburbs to be closer to the amenities of the downtown area. This often led to **gentrification**, where increased property values displace lower-income families and small businesses. Initially, low-income, historic housing near the city center attracted middle- and upper-income families. As these families moved in and renovated the housing, other families did the same. Over time, this renovation increased property values – an advantage for city officials who saw an increase in property tax revenue. For the poorest in the communities, however, this increase in property values often meant that they could no longer afford to rent near the central city. Given the auto-dependency of the sprawling suburbs, where would someone live if they had no transportation and worked in the downtown area? The walkability of the downtown, an amenity for those relocating from the suburbs, was often a necessity for low-income workers.

Gentrification also changes the racial and ethnic makeup of neighborhoods, as most people moving into these changing urban areas are typically white. The Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn, for example, was traditionally an African American community but beginning in the 2000s, began to experience gentrification (Figure 3). The percentage of white residents increased from 2.4 percent in 2000 to 22 percent in 2013. Median home prices jumped, too, from $400,000 in 2011 to $765,000 in 2016. New businesses have located in the area and the gentrification has funded major infrastructure improvements. For the neighborhood’s poorest residents, however, these improvements have pushed housing and rent prices beyond what they can afford.
Figure \(\PageIndex{5}\): Gentrified Neighborhood in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, New York
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