Editors' Introduction

Perhaps no place and time of urban history has been more exhaustively studied than the cities of the United States during the industrial transformation and after — that is, during the period from the mid-nineteenth century when industrial enterprises, which had originated in Europe, began to secure a foothold in North America to the period in the mid-twentieth century when the United States became a world power and its cities were regarded as the paradigm examples of advanced, "modern" urbanism. It was an extraordinary period of rapid transformation, both socially and technologically, and it is the subject of Sam Bass Warner's "Evolution and Transformation: The American Industrial Metropolis, 1840–1940," an essay specially prepared for this edition of The City Reader.

Warner summarizes the broad range of areas in which the very terms of urban life changed during the century after the onset of the Industrial Revolution. Among these were economic cycles of boom and bust culminating in the Great Depression of the 1930s, new types of power (from the muscle power of men and animals to water, steam, and electricity) and new types of transportation (from walking and horse-drawn wagons to railroads, interurban tramways, and the first appearance of those extraordinary new machines, the truck and the personal automobile). He notes that these new technologies and economic changes led the way toward new urban spatial arrangements — inner-city neighborhoods, suburbs, specialized industrial districts, and commercial downtowns with their department stores and soaring skyscrapers. He also notes the extraordinary, and often unexpected, social transformations that accompanied and intertwined with these other developments. Among these were the cultural accommodation of massive waves of foreign immigration, the growing power of labor unions, voting and employment rights for women, and the beginnings of the more gradual process of full enfranchisement for African Americans that began with emancipation after the Civil War and continued through decades of Jim Crow segregation, discrimination, and inequality.

Born and raised in Boston, Sam Bass Warner graduated from Harvard in 1950, took a master's degree in journalism from Boston University, and received his doctorate in history from Harvard in 1959. What followed was a career as a teacher and scholar that would include professorships at Washington University in St. Louis, the University of Michigan, Boston University, Brandeis University and, since 1994, the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Along the way, he has been awarded fellowships at Harvard's Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. He has also served as a member of the Advisory Council of the United States National Archives, the National Research Council, and the Inter-University Consortium for Political Research and has been a member of the Executive Committee of the Organization of American Historians and President of the Urban History Association.

Warner's exceptionally distinguished career has been based on his skills as a teacher and mentor and on a series of books that place him in the first rank of historians of the city as a unique social, technological, and


Never before in human history had people built a society based upon steam-powered machines. Friedrich Engels saw the beginnings of this process at its early stages. His was the moment when the gathering of mechanized factories established large cities. He could not have known in 1844 that as the process unfolded, all of England, and all modern nations, would come to be organized by huge industrial metropolises of more than a million inhabitants.

This essay will pick up the story of the American industrial metropolis in the years after 1840. It will follow its path of development in two stages: the years to 1920 and the years from 1920 to 1940. Just as Engels picked up the story of the merchant economy turning to an industrial one, so during the 1920s a wholly new urban society began to emerge.

A parade of surprises characterized the century. Basic changes in the energy available to the city, first steam and then electricity, transformed the form of the urban settlement and the life within it. How might anyone have imagined a city of lights, a downtown and the crowds on its streets, a city of skyscrapers and miles and miles of small houses? These obvious surprises merely record the surface of change because technology, social and cultural invention, politics, and historical inheritances interact in complicated ways. A water pipe and a light bulb and a steel building frame are but the tools of complex social and cultural
invention. The railroad and the steamship made the American industrial metropolis into a crossroads for the young people of Europe. This abundance of youthful hands revived a system of garment manufacture as old as Shakespeare's tailor. Manufacturers gave out materials for families to sew and assemble in their own rooms. In this way international transportation fostered the tenement sweatshop, but the newcomers' unions gave the city new voices and fresh expectations. These same machines, the railroad and the steamship, connected and inter-connected with all manner of business institutions of finance, manufacture and marketing to press down upon American society and its cities a completely unstable economy that alternated booms with dangerous economic collapse.

THE AMERICAN INDUSTRIAL CITY EMERGES

Commonly a focus on factories and machines leads a historian to neglect the essential role of animals and humans in carrying out industrialization. In fact, coal and biopower together fueled the growth of the modern American metropolis. The coal-fired steam engines of the railroads and steamships tied the city to the world's resources and markets, while coal-fired furnaces and engines enabled factories to escape their water-powered sites so that they might locate near the city's port or alongside the railroad lines. Later, subsequent to the 1890s, coal powered the generation of electricity for streetcars, subways, elevated railroads, electric lights, elevators, and numberless small motors. In the twentieth century, petroleum joined coal as the fuel for transportation.

Steam-powered machines have captured our historical imagination, but they all depended on biopower to make them work. The city of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries depended on horses to pull the streetcars, wagons, and taxis, and to power many construction tasks. Further, both the horses and the machines depended upon the city's army of men, women and children to tend them. Even the few automatic machines of the time, like rotary presses, looms and screw machines, required constant attention. Most, like sewing machines, steam presses, lathes, and saws, required a person to feed them. In addition, every object that moved in the city was first lifted, carried, or carted by a laborer. Indeed, historians have been surprised to notice that the increase in heavy manufactures—like steel and pipes and shipyards for iron and steel ships—brought with it an increase in the proportion of unskilled laborers as opposed to craftsmen.

Thus from 1840 to about 1920 during this major surge of industrialization, every newcomer to the city represented a gain, a fresh addition of a little biopower to the human settlement. Yet, until the twentieth century, the city quite literally consumed young people and children. It injured and killed young men and women workers with industrial accidents and pollutants, malnutrition, overcrowded housing and disease. It killed children faster than they could be born. No large nineteenth-century city in the world could sustain itself by the natural reproduction of its resident population.

Because large cities drew their human resources from national and international trading networks, changes at a distance impacted local conditions. The 1840s famine in Ireland and the appearance of crowded Irish slums and shanties in New York and Boston is such a well-known case. The change in urban survival also followed upon distance events.

Fresh farmland in the western United States and Europe, when tilled with new farm machinery and new agricultural practices, produced a flood of inexpensive grain, hay and meat. The refrigeration of meat and dairy products, the canning of meat, fruits and vegetables, and the pasteurization of milk allowed the nation's railroad network to fill the markets of the city with safe products. Here in the city a chain of very long-term incremental municipal investments in water and sewer systems and the introduction of public health inspection created an environment of plentiful and clean foodstuffs, even for the poor. To be sure, every man, woman and child dwelling in large American cities at any given moment during the twentieth century did not have enough to eat, but the level of starvation and malnutrition ceased to be a population control. Thereby, from the early decades of the twentieth century onwards, the large American city and its equivalents in modern Europe became habitable places for humans.

IMMIGRATION EXPERIENCES

Overseas immigrants to American cities followed the pathways of food, cotton and coal, steamships to and from Europe, railroads among cities. The
immigrant parade itself depended upon the sequential destruction of local peasant economies by the railroad and its delivery of cheap grain and inexpensive manufactured goods to the villages and towns. First, modern agricultural methods and land enclosures destroyed the old rural economies of Great Britain, Ireland and Germany, sending these country folks to America and Britain’s new factories. Then as the transportation network spread, Norwegians, Swedes, Danes, Poles, Hungarians, Italians, Russians and Greeks, and peoples of the Mediterranean followed.

The degree of survival of these immigrant peoples revealed itself only slowly in the cities’ census statistics. Nevertheless, parallel and unconnected events accompanied this remarkable demographic change. By 1920 the progress of mechanization had proceeded so far that the addition of a new pair of willing hands and a strong back did not add to the city’s wealth. The city continued to seek skilled workers, but the unskilled proved redundant. During this same post-World War I decade, fear of foreigners, fears of European socialist and communist ideas, anti-Semitism and labor unions’ desire to cut back on competition among workers combined to pass federal legislation severely rationing overseas immigration. The rationing itself favored the early comers – Germans, Irish, and Britons. In consequence, the history of the metropolis from 1920 to 1940 differs markedly from its earlier experiences. During the 1930s, the major urban migrants were native American farmers driven off their farms by low prices and drought. Those already settled in the city subsequently spent many of the following decades learning to master their ethnic, religious, and racial prejudices.

In a new continent rich in untapped natural resources and prolific inventions, the returns to capital far exceeded those to labor. Consequently, extremes of wealth and sharp class divisions emerged as the century wore on. For those with capital or access to funds, hard work, luck, and leverage enabled business people to amass substantial profits from new resources, new inventions, new business methods, and the appreciation of land values in the rapidly growing city. The migrant, however, whether from overseas or an American farm, who arrived in the city without money had somehow to find a way to advance from unskilled labor jobs. Machine tending in a factory or construction work offered many a working-class income. Also, white native Americans often found jobs as clerks in offices or as sales people.

**SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS**

The women traditionally took up domestic service, and many immigrant girls worked in factories before marriage. During the 1840s and subsequently, married women often supported their families by leasing a house and running it as a boarding house. The housekeeper offered single rooms and two meals a day. Toward the end of the century, women found fresh opportunities selling in stores, nursing, elementary school teaching and staffing telephone switchboards. In all these roles, the customs and prejudices of men kept the women’s wages well below those of the men.

Children helped out their families in home manufactures and in family stores. Many worked as office and errand boys. One future governor of New York, Al Smith, upon the death of his father, ran about Lower Manhattan carrying messages to teamsters telling them where their wagons should go for the next load.

Social connections have always been valuable, and the help of family, friends and neighbors proved the most reliable source of jobs. There were private employment offices, to be sure, but they were expensive, unreliable and often fraudulent. Once the job had been found, the fate of the worker depended upon the patronage of the owner and the tyranny of the foreman. There were few remedies for mistreatment, harassment, short wages, false clocks and extra hours.

**THE ROLE OF LABOR**

Since the eighteenth century, carpenters and masons had organized themselves into unions, and later, others – especially printers, shoe and textile workers – continued the union movement. At mid-century, however, many courts held strikes and workers’ boycotts of offending firms to be criminal offenses. Yet despite the legal obstacles in boom years, the craft unions and working people’s politics made progress. But when economic depressions set in and thousands of men and women became unemployed, organized labor and its programs collapsed.

So the movement to establish a ten-hour workday fell in the depression of the 1850s, and its revival was later squelched by the deep depression of 1873 that persisted in the form of low wages and prices until the mid-1890s. Yet, bit by bit, craft unions of skilled workers...
and some factory operatives made headway. Secure unions often could be built upon ethnic solidarity, like those of the German cigar makers and the Philadelphia English cotton workers.

Because factories grew ever larger, and because they located within and next to large cities, every American metropolis experienced massive labor actions. The railway workers strike of 1877 broke out in many cities, especially Pittsburgh where workers burned the railroad cars and fired rifles and a cannon at the troops sent to quell the strike. Later the Homestead strike in Pittsburgh (1892), the Pullman strike in Chicago (1894), the garment workers' strike in New York City (1910), and the silk workers in Patterson, New Jersey, (1913) proved major events dividing middle-class voters from their working-class fellow citizens. These strikes often turned violent because employers hired private police to attack the workers.

In 1914, the Clayton Anti-Trust Act established the legality of unions in the United States, but until business people and the general public regarded unions as a regular element in American business, labor relations remained an urban battleground. Frightened politicians built armories next to elite neighborhoods to protect them from the possible dangers of mobs of workers and established state police corps to keep order during strikes. The demands of some workers for socialism unleashed a long-standing media attack that persists to this day. It consciously muddles revolutionary socialism and anarchism with sensible social democratic reform proposals. Indeed, during the early twentieth century, "gas and water socialism" — the call for the municipal ownership of streetcar and utility monopolies — found acceptance in a number of cities.

THE PHYSICAL CITY AND THE NEW DOWNTOWN

A mix of transportation change and changes in the organization of work set the geography of the new metropolis. In the city of 1840, most people walked. Only steam ferries carried any volume of passengers. Cumbersome large coaches called omnibuses ran on the main streets but they were expensive, as were the horse-drawn taxis. Only the rich could afford to keep a private carriage. The new railroads of the 1840s and 1850s laid out what later would become important commuter lines, and the introduction of horse-drawn streetcars during these same years in time enabled the city to double its settlement radius.

Even before these transportation changes had taken effect, more business and new business began to create a new urban element, the modern downtown. The former merchant and warehouse area split into parts as it grew. The warehouse area expanded and began to attach itself to the new railroad yards. The former all-purpose merchant counting houses divided and subdivided into offices of wholesale and commission merchants, importers, commodity traders, bankers, insurance and real estate offices, stock brokers, lawyers and surveyors. From this multiplication arose a downtown office concentration of four- and five-story office buildings. Large hotels settled next this concentration, and dry goods merchants who began to expand their offerings for the well-to-do settled their stores on the downtown fringe. Nearby, there was often a street of inexpensive stores that catered to the downtown clerks and working class customers.

Altogether, this downtown base of the mid-nineteenth century grew and elaborated into a gathering of newspapers, hotels, skyscraper offices buildings, and downtown department stores: Macy's and Gimbel's in New York, Wannamaker's in Philadelphia, Jordan Marsh in Boston, Marshall Field's in Chicago. Only railroads, shipyards, foundries, coal yards and gas works required large spaces. Everything else fitted into the small lots along the city's streets. Whether old like Boston and New York, or new like Chicago, small shops, two- and three-family houses, boarding houses, factories, workrooms and livery stables mixed in together. This pepper and salt mix of work and residence created a city of multiethnic neighborhoods as immigrants and natives alike settled near their workplaces. A local mortgage market financed much of this mixed urban fabric. City residents with a little capital lent small sums for short terms of five to ten years through the agency of downtown brokers to builders and homeowners. By such a union of small savings, local builders and local brokers the beginning of the industrial metropolis was built.

THE SEGREGATED CITY

In these mid-nineteenth-century decades, only three groups of residents lived separated from everyone else: the poor (mostly new immigrants), free African
Americans, and the wealthy. These years may have been the meanest and nastiest time for housing for the poor. Landlords cut up old houses into single rooms, some in the basement, others without an outside window; a tap for cold running water appeared only in some buildings, and privies sat in the back yard. Where there had been an open yard, owners filled the rear spaces. Since these slums grew in the oldest sections of town, they stood near the port and in the shadow of the new downtown. Free African Americans settled along a few poor streets, poor because they were confined by white prejudice to low-paying servant, peddler, and wharf-side jobs. A few had managed to become doctors, lawyers and owners of small businesses, but they too were not welcome to live among whites. Successful old merchant families and the newly rich set themselves apart from the general run of mixed neighborhoods. Developers laid out small sections designed in the latest fashions to cater to these buyers: Boston’s Beacon Hill and Back Bay, New York’s Gramercy Park and Fifth Avenue, Chicago’s Gold Coast, and San Francisco’s Nob Hill.

From these partially differentiated beginnings, the functionally specialized and socially segregated modern industrial metropolis emerged. Changes in work and transportation again set the frame. Office work, retailing, business services and financial institutions multiplied and expanded to build the crowded downtown of large buildings and skyscrapers. The railroad lines out from the city center became industrial corridors for meat packing, railroad equipment building, automobile assembly, lumber yards, printing, piano factories, and shoe and textile mills. Some of the largest enterprises, like steel mills and oil refining, established satellite cities of their own at the outer edges of the metropolis: Gary, Indiana; Oakland, California; Quincy, Massachusetts; Newark and Bayonne, New Jersey.

The railroads that supported these concentrations also facilitated the expansion of the earlier elite settlements, while the high cost of rail commuting kept most residents out. Luxury suburbs extended outwards from their old inner bases: Boston’s Brookline and western suburbs, Philadelphia’s Main Line, New York’s Long Island, and Chicago’s North Shore communities.

Most residents in the late nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth depended initially on the horse car and then, after 1890, on its improvement, the electric streetcar. Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago also constructed subways and elevated railroads to deal with inner city crowding and to carry the downtown workers and shoppers to their homes. These public carriers allowed the industrial metropolis to spread outwards in a rough social geometry of poor and African Americans in the old inner sections of the city, the working class in multiple housing along the transit lines, and the middle class in single and double homes beyond. The residential hallmarks of the twentieth-century metropolis were such places as New York’s Brooklyn and the Bronx, Philadelphia’s West Philadelphia, Boston’s Roxbury and Dorchester, Chicago’s South Side, San Francisco’s West Portal and Sunset districts, and the ever-widening towns and suburbs that were to become the vast metropolis of Greater Los Angeles.

### Yet Another Stage of Urban Evolution

Because the depression of the 1930s slowed the pace of change, from World War I to 1940 the American industrial metropolis continued along the pathways laid down earlier. Yet, aided by hindsight, it is possible to observe the beginnings of economic and social changes that would transform these urban regions once again. Just as it required half a century after 1840 for the industrial metropolis to realize its mature organization, so it took another fifty years for the metropolis of the 1920s to fully assume its later patterns of a controlled and government-supported market economy, the dispersed geography of the automobile and the open social forms of full citizenship for African Americans and women.

During the 1920s, new marketing techniques addressed the failings of industrial production. At the heart of the problem lay the manufacturers’ ability to make more goods than the wages they paid would allow people to purchase. In consequence, the industrial economy fluctuated between full production at robust prices and over-supply, distress prices, lay-offs, unemployment and the inadequate aid of municipal soup kitchens and wood yards.

A partial solution lay in understandings among firms to keep prices uniform and steady while competing in marketing. Two steps needed to be taken. Wholesale distributors needed to be eliminated because they manipulated prices to their advantage when a glut occurred. Manufacturers, therefore, must undertake their own distribution. Second, manufacturers must set...
aside large budgets for advertising, packaging, and brand promotion. Nationally advertised and distributed products multiplied during these years: soft drinks, cigars and cigarettes, automobiles, radios, packaged flour and cereals. Investment bankers began to appreciate the possibilities of large-scale retailing and they invested in chains of stores like Woolworth's and A & P groceries. The banking firm, Lehman Brothers, even assembled a chain of downtown department stores. The city's downtown now attained a new level of fantasy with elegant store windows, advertising billboards and bright theater lights.

Purchases on time contracts completed the marketing revolution. With sales of goods "on time," the manufacturer and storekeeper literally give their wares to a customer in return for the patron's promise to pay for them sometime in the future. John Wannamaker introduced charge cards for his department store customers, others soon followed. Until General Motors began selling cars on time payments in 1919, automobiles had been bought with cash. Soon, alongside these retail innovations, consumer installment loan companies sprang up to lend small sums at high interest rates.

Urban housing underwent a similar transformation to planned marketing. Developers of large suburban properties and owners of expensive center city real estate both wanted security for their investments. In the suburbs, the enemies were the cheap house, store, gas station, bar or apartment house that might settle next to an area planned for medium to high priced homes. Downtown, fear took form of factory buildings impinging on a retail street, or a monster building, like the Equitable Life Insurance Company offices overpowering their neighbors. In consequence, these interests promoted zoning laws that controlled land according to categories of use like residential, industrial and retail, and also set forth some limits on building types. New York City assumed the innovator's role in 1915, and soon zoning spread from state to state urged on by federal encouragement. The uniformities of metropolitan suburbs have their origins in these investment planning and marketing strategies of the 1920s.

A post-World War I housing boom filled out suburbs that railway commuters and streetcar and subway and elevated riders had begun, but the automobile did not yet alter the shape of the metropolis. Suburbanization in the 1920s did draw many families of modest incomes outward, and in consequence the long process of reducing the density of inner-city neighborhoods began during these years. The popularity of the new machine and its rapid diffusion brought daily traffic jams to the downtown. Cities spent enormous sums to pave streets and make traffic improvements since in these years neither state nor federal funds were available for use on city roadways. By 1940, glimpses of the future automobile metropolis appeared. The immensely popular General Motors Futurama exhibit at the New York World's Fair in 1939 demonstrated a region of continuous automobile flow. Even then, some new highways had been built or were building: the Pasadena Freeway in Los Angeles, the Pennsylvania Turnpike, the Merritt Parkway in Connecticut, and the first miles of Boston's circumferential highway, Route 128.

**THE MODERN URBAN ECONOMY**

Neither the federal government nor the states restrained the banking system during the 1920s so that developers over-borrowed to build city apartment houses and suburban homes. Some developers even established small banks to furnish themselves with capital. During the boom that peaked in 1926, the local mortgage market became more and more one of banks and insurance companies and less and less one of local lenders and their brokers. In consequence, the overextension of mortgages and consumer credit on time purchases joined the uncontrolled international banking, stock and bond markets in a disastrous collapse. By contrast, during the 1970s the new metropolis was sustained in its building and prosperity by federal regulation of banks and mortgages. Also the federal Cold War budget financed extensive government purchases that in turn made up for any shortfall in consumers' ability to buy.

The American public and American business people have never been able to settle upon an institution that would counterbalance the power of employers. During World War I, in order to maintain full production, the federal government oversaw labor relations and even nationalized the railroads to see that they were managed efficiently. The experience offered some precedents that might have been adapted to peacetime. Instead, the Russian Revolution and fears of socialism fostered a violent attack on unions as they launched strikes in 1919–1922 to offset wartime price inflation. The union movement did not recover from these attacks until the 1930s and the massive industrial
strikes in the automobile and steel industries. A reformed federal administration also established the rules for organizing and collective bargaining. There followed the World War II unionization of a large segment of workers that proved an integral element in the later reorganization of the metropolis. Because union wages served as a yardstick for all workers, large numbers of families were able to purchase small new homes in the automobile suburbs.

THE ONGOING SOCIAL STRUGGLE

For African Americans, the long road from slavery to full citizenship took an encouraging turn during the 1920s. The largest metropolises, New York and Chicago, had attracted many African American migrants north to meet their demands for more workers. In New York because of a local collapse in the real estate market, and in Chicago because of a fierce race riot in 1919, African Americans came to be confined to the concentrated ghettos of Harlem and the South Side. The communities proved large enough to support newspapers, theaters, and special African American stores and services. In New York, they also drew black talent from across the nation who began a literary and cultural movement now known as the Harlem Renaissance. Black writers captured few white readers, but the jazz musicians and songwriters found ever growing national audiences when they brought their music before white listeners. Finally, after years of being belittled, African American men and women came to be widely admired. The civil rights movement and the desegregation of the northern metropolises would be years in the future, but the "Jazz Age" marked the beginnings of respect.

A romantic haze now obscures the image of another 1920s figure, "the flapper," a then-novel young woman with short hair and short skirts. Her dancing and partying made her a volunteer in the culture wars of this Prohibition era. The attempt to halt the sale of alcoholic beverages in 1920, the Volstead Act, was part of a backlash that fed upon the fears of rural Americans and their city cousins. The pace of material change frightened many, and the waves of new ideas and immigrants frightened others. Like its companion legislation to ration foreign immigration, Prohibition was an exercise in social control.

In contrast to "flappers," working-class women had long shocked public sensibilities with labor activism. Even the Lowell cotton spinning and weaving girls, subjects of a much-admired paternalistic management, went out on strike in 1834 and 1836. Also, middle-class and wealthy women living in the American metropolises had a long and distinguished history of charity and reform. They established settlement houses, informal schools and aid stations, in the poorest sections of town. They supported housing and factory investigations and child labor laws, and promoted coal smoke abatement. Schools, playgrounds and gardens were also central concerns. Some women had worked for Prohibition, others for the nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution permitting women to vote, and still others campaigned against the United States' entry into World War I. When the right to vote arrived in August 1919, it could have been regarded as a recognition of women's leadership. The reform initiatives continued with the establishment of the League of Women Voters, who worked for informed and open politics. In the suburbs, where government units were small and the politics personal, women had a strong effect on behalf of the new ideas of zoning and land planning as well as support for taxes to fund public schools. If you happen to visit an especially attractive suburb nowadays, chances are that some of its charm stems from the work of women in the town.

Yet the flapper's cheeky behavior and the right to vote proved but small beginnings. The flapper was essentially a girl, not a woman, and during the 1920s and many years thereafter, American women were to be housewives and mothers. If they held jobs, their wages were to be well below those of men, and their occupations restricted to a short list. Only with the shift of the urban economy toward the multiplication of white-collar work and the development of easy forms of birth control did women move forward to take a position as full citizens.

AN ERA OF CHANGE

Overall, during the century from 1840 to 1940, the industrial metropolis fostered patterns that never could have been anticipated. Settlements of such magnitude had never existed in the extended fashion afforded by the railroad and the streetcar. Never had such a large city been a fit place for its human population. Almost all the technology and almost all the business methods were new, and in the American case the politics rested on inventions of the late eighteenth century. In fact the
factories and mean streets and slum houses of the mid-nineteenth century gave few clues for what lay ahead.

Although automobiles sold by the millions before 1940, it was only with the building of the interstate highway system that some of the possibilities of an automobile-dominated metropolis began to reveal themselves. Once again the machine and its roadways disguised the complex processes of economic, social and cultural adaptation; the destruction of the inherited downtowns, the collapse of urban public education, the heightened segregation of race and class, the Civil Rights and Feminist movements, the isolation of families and the rush of women into the workplace.

**SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS**


On biopower and the use of animals, see Clay McShane and Joel A. Tarr, *The Horse and the City* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).


An account by a woman who went to the villages and saw the rural destruction process in action is Emily Greened Baich, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens* (1910; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969).


On the process of banking and real estate collapse, see Miles Coles, *American Housing, Problems and Perspectives* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1944).


"The Drive-in Culture of Contemporary America"
from Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States (1985)

Kenneth T. Jackson

Editors' Introduction

As Friedrich Engels (p. 46), Sam Bass Warner (p. 55), Robert Bruegmann (p. 211), Robert Fishman (p. 75), and others have shown, suburbia has a long history, extending back at least as far as the European and American railway suburbs that arose as retreats from the polluted industrial cities for the comfortable middle class. But suburbanization took on new form and historical significance in the 1920s and in the years following World War II. The initial locus was the United States, and the catalyzing technology was the automobile. In Crabgrass Frontier, Kenneth T. Jackson, sometimes called the dean of American urban historians, provides a sweeping overview of the "suburban revolution" in the United States. In the chapter entitled "The Drive-in Culture of Contemporary America," he lays out a devastating critique of the mostly negative social and cultural effects that the private automobile has had on urban society.

Kenneth Jackson did not originate the critique of suburbia. Indeed, the suburban developments of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s in North America and elsewhere gave birth to a massive literature, most of it highly critical. Damned as culturally dead and socially and racially segregated, the post-World War II suburbs were called "sprawl" and stigmatized as "anti-cities" (to use Lewis Mumford's term to describe Los Angeles). Titles such as John Keats's The Crack in the Picture Window (1956), Richard Gordon's The Split-level Trap (1961), Mark Baldassare's Trouble in Paradise (1986), Robert Fogelson's Bourgeois Nightmares (2005), David Goetz's Death by Suburb: How to Keep the Suburb from Killing Your Soul (2007), and Saralee Rosenberg's Dear Neighbor, Drop Dead (2008) capture the tone of much of the commentary. Indeed, James Howard Kunstler in The Geography of Nowhere (1993) calls the automobile suburbs "the evil empire," Joel S. Hirschhorn titles his analysis Sprawl Kills (2005), and another radical analysis screams Bomb the Suburbs (2001)! Nevertheless, Jackson's well-documented analysis of the artifacts of suburban culture — everything from three-car garages to drive-in churches — stands as the definitive statement on how the automobile transformed both the structure and social life of modern cities.

Kenneth T. Jackson (b. 1939) is the Jacques Barzun Professor of History and the Social Sciences at Columbia University. He earned his PhD at the University of Chicago and is a past president of the Urban History Association and the Organization of American Historians. He is the editor of the Encyclopedia of New York City, 2nd edn (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010) and the author of several influential books including The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915–1930 (Chicago, IL: I. R. Dee, 1992) and Cities in American History, with Stanley Schultz (New York: Knopf, 1972). Jackson has been called an "urban pessimist" because of his dark view of suburbanization — a current work in progress on American transportation policy is entitled The Road to Hell — but in a recent interview he noted that he now sees "a ray of hope" for cities "after a long decline."


The postwar years brought unprecedented prosperity to the United States, as color televisions, stereo systems, frost-free freezers, electric blenders, and automatic garbage disposals became basic equipment in the middle-class American home. But the best symbol of individual success and identity was a sleek, air-conditioned, high-powered, personal statement on wheels. Between 1950 and 1980, when the American population increased by 50 percent, the number of their automobiles increased by 200 percent. In high school the most important rite of passage came to be the earning of a driver's license and the freedom to press an accelerator to the floor. Educational administrators across the country had to make parking space for hundreds of student vehicles. A car became one's identity, and the important question was: "What does he drive?" Not only teenagers, but also millions of older persons literally defined themselves in terms of the number, cost, style, and horsepower of their vehicles. "Escape," thinks a character in a novel by Joyce Carol Oates. "As long as he had his own car he was an American and could not die."

Unfortunately, Americans did die, often behind the wheel. On September 9, 1989, as he was stepping off a streetcar at 74th Street and Central Park West in New York, Henry H. Bliss was struck and killed by a motor vehicle, thus becoming the first fatality in the long war between flesh and steel. Thereafter, the carnage increased almost annually until Americans were sustaining about 50,000 traffic deaths and about 2 million nonfatal injuries per year. Automobility proved to be far more deadly than war for the United States. It was as if a Pearl Harbor attack took place on the highways every two weeks, with crashes becoming so commonplace that an entire industry sprang up to provide medical, legal, and insurance services for the victims.

The environmental cost was almost as high as the human toll. In 1984 the 159 million cars, trucks, and buses on the nation's roads were guzzling millions of barrels of oil every day, causing traffic jams that shattered nerves and clogged the cities they were supposed to open up and turning much of the countryside to pavement. Not surprisingly, when gasoline shortages created long lines at the pumps in 1974 and 1979, behavioral scientists noted that many people experienced anger, depression, frustration, and insecurity, as well as a formidable sense of loss.

Such reactions were possible because the automobile and the suburb have combined to create a drive-in culture that is part of the daily experience of most Americans. Moreover, the American people have proven to be no more prone to motor vehicle purchases than the citizens of other lands. After World War II, the Europeans and the Japanese began to catch up, and by 1980 both had achieved the same level of automobile ownership that the United States had reached in 1950. In automotive technology. American dominance slipped away in the postwar years as German, Swedish, and Japanese engineers pioneered the development of diesel engines, front-wheel drive engines.

Although American John B. Re and could fundament in the Unit advised his car and bu course, the in the Am Morgan to serve a "a complete
wheel drives, disc brakes, fuel-injection, and rotary engines.

Although it is not accurate to speak of a uniquely American love affair with the automobile, and although John B. Rae claimed too much when he wrote in 1971 that "modern suburbia is a creature of the automobile and could not exist without it," the motor vehicle has fundamentally restructured the pattern of everyday life in the United States. As a young man, Lewis Mumford advised his countrymen to "forget the damned motor car and build cities for lovers and friends." As it was, of course, the nation followed a different pattern. Writing in the American Builder in 1929, the critic Willard Morgan noted that the building of drive-in structures to serve a motor-driven population had ushered in "a completely new architectural form."

THE INTERSTATE HIGHWAY

The most popular exhibit at the New York World's Fair in 1939 was General Motors' "Futurama." Looking twenty-five years ahead, it offered a "magic Aladdin-like flight through time and space." Fair-goers stood in hour-long lines, waiting to travel on a moving sidewalk above a huge model created by designer Norman Bel Geddes. Miniature superhighways with 50,000 automated cars wove past model farms en route to model cities. . . . The message of "Futurama" was as impressive as its millions of model parts: "The job of building the future is one which will demand our best energies, our most fruitful imagination; and that with it will come greater opportunities for all."

The promise of a national system of impressive roadways attracted a diverse group of lobbyists, including the Automobile Manufacturers Association, state-highway administrators, motor-bus operators, the American Trucking Association, and even the American Parking Association - for the more cars on the road, the more cars would be parked at the end of the journey. Truck companies, for example, promoted legislation to spend state gasoline taxes on highways, rather than on schools, hospitals, welfare, or public transit. In 1943 these groups came together as the American Road Builders Association, with General Motors as the largest contributor, to form a lobbying enterprise second only to that of the munitions industry. By the mid-1950s, it had become one of the most broad-based of all pressure groups, consisting of the oil, rubber, asphalt, and construction industries; the car dealers and renters; the trucking and bus concerns; the banks and advertising agencies that depended upon the companies involved; and the labor unions.

On the local level, professional real estate groups and home-builders' associations joined the movement in the hope that highways would cause a spurt in housing turnover and a jump in prices. They envisaged no mere widening of existing roads, but the creation of an entirely new superhighway system and the initiation of the largest peacetime construction project in history.

[. . .]

Sensitive to mounting political pressure, President Dwight Eisenhower appointed a committee in 1954 to "study" the nation's highway requirements. Its conclusions were foregone, in part because the chairman was Lucius D. Clay, a member of the board of directors of General Motors. The committee considered no alternative to a massive highway system, and it suggested a major redirection of national policy to benefit the car and the truck. The Interstate Highway Act became law in 1956, when the Congress provided for a 41,000-mile (eventually expanded to a 42,500-mile) system, with the federal government paying 90 percent of the cost. President Eisenhower gave four reasons for signing the measure: current highways were unsafe; cars too often became snarled in traffic jams; poor roads saddled business with high costs for transportation; and modern highways were needed because "in case of atomic attack on our key cities, the road net must permit quick evacuation of target areas." Not a single word was said about the impact of highways on cities and suburbs, although the concrete thoroughfares and the thirty-five-ton tractor-trailers which used them encouraged the continued outward movement of industries toward the beltways and interchanges. Moreover, the interstate system helped continue the downward spiral of public transportation and virtually guaranteed that future urban growth would perpetuate a centerless sprawl . . .

[. . .]

The inevitable result of the bias in American transport funding, a bias that existed for a generation before the Interstate Highway program was initiated, is that the United States now has the world's best road system and very nearly its worst public transit offerings. Los Angeles, in particular, provides the nation's most dramatic example of urban sprawl tailored to the mobility of the automobile. Its vast, amorphous conglomeration of housing tracts, shopping centers,
THE GARAGE

The drive-in structure that is closest to the hearts, bodies, and cars of the American family is the garage. It is the link between the home and the outside world. The word is French, meaning storage space, but its transformation into a multipurpose enclosure internally integrated with the dwelling is distinctively American.

[...]

After World War I, house plans of the expensive variety began to include garages, and by the mid-1920s driveways were commonplace and garages had become important selling points. The popular 1928 Home Builders pattern book offered designs for fifty garages in wood, Tudor, and brick varieties. In affluent sections, such large and efficiently planned structures included housing above for the family chauffeur. In less pretentious neighborhoods, the small, single-purpose garages were scarcely larger than the vehicles themselves... Although there was a tendency to move garages closer to the house, they typically remained at the rear of the property before 1925, often with access via an alley which ran parallel to the street. The car was still thought of as something similar to a horse—dependable and important, but not something that one needed to be close to in the evening.

By 1935, however, the garage was beginning to merge into the house itself, and in 1937 the Architectural Record noted that “the garage has become a very essential part of the residence.” The tendency accelerated after World War II, as alleys went the way of the horse-drawn wagon, as front door widths more often exceeded fifty feet, and as the car became not only a status symbol, but almost a member of the family, to be cared for and sheltered. The introduction of a canopied and unenclosed structure called a “carport” represented an inexpensive solution to the problem, particularly in mild climates, but in the 1950s the enclosed garage was back in favor and a necessity even in a tract house. Easy access to the automobile became a key aspect of residential design, and not only for the well-to-do. By the 1960s garages often occupied about 400 square feet (about one-third that of the house itself) and usually contained space for two automobiles and a variety of lawn and woodworking tools. Offering direct access to the house (a conveniently placed door usually led directly into the kitchen), the garage had become an integrated part of the dwelling, and it dominated the front facades of new houses. In California garages and driveways were often so prominent that any house would almost be described as accessible to the garage. Few people, however, went to the extremes common in England, where the automobile was often so precious that living rooms were often converted to garages.

THE MOTEL

As the United States became a rubber-tire civilization, a new kind of roadside architecture was created to convey an instantly recognizable image to the fast-moving traveler. Criticized as tasteless, cheap, forgettable, and flimsy by most commentators, drive-in structures did attract the attention of some talented architects, most notably Los Angeles’s Richard Neutra. For him, the automobile symbolized modernity, and its design paralleled his own ideals of precision and efficiency. This correlation between the structure and the car began to be celebrated in the late 1960s and 1970s when architects Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour developed such concepts as “architecture as symbol” and the...
"architecture of communication." Their book, *Learning From Las Vegas*, was instrumental in encouraging a shift in taste from general condemnation to appreciation of the commercial strip and especially of the huge and garish signs which were easily recognized by passing motorists.

A ubiquitous example of the drive-in culture is the motel. In the middle of the nineteenth century, every city, every county seat, every aspiring mining town, every wide place in the road with aspirations to larger size, had to have a hotel. Whether such structures were grand palaces on the order of Boston’s Tremont House or New York’s Fifth Avenue Hotel, or whether they were jerry-built shacks, they were typically located at the center of the business district, at the focal point of community activities. To a considerable extent, the hotel was the place for informal social interaction and business, and the very heart and soul of the city.

Between 1910 and 1920, however, increasing numbers of traveling motorists created a market for overnight accommodation along the highways. The first tourists simply camped wherever they chose along the road. By 1924, several thousand municipal campgrounds were opened which offered cold water spigots and outdoor privies. Next came the “cabin camps,” which consisted of tiny, white clapboard cottages arranged in a semicircle and often set in a grove of trees. Initially called “tourist courts,” these establishments were cheap, convenient, and informal, and by 1926 there were an estimated two thousand of them, mostly in the West and in Florida.

It was not until 1952 that Kemmons Wilson and Wallace E. Johnson opened their first “Holiday Inn” on Summer Avenue in Memphis. But long before that, in 1926, a San Luis Obispo, California, proprietor had coined a new word, “motel,” to describe an establishment that allowed a guest to park his car just outside his room . . .

Motels began to thrive after World War II, when the typical establishment was larger and more expensive than the earlier cabins. Major chains set standards for prices, services, and respectability that the traveling public could depend on. As early as 1948, there were 26,000 self-styled motels in the United States. Hard-won respectability attracted more middle-class families, and by 1960 there were 60,000 such places, a figure that doubled again by 1972. By that time an old hotel was closing somewhere in downtown America every thirty hours. And somewhere in sub-

urban America, a plastic and glass Shangri-La was rising to take its place.

[. . .]

THE DRIVE-IN THEATER

The downtown movie theaters and old vaudeville houses faced a similar challenge from the automobile. In 1933 Richard M. Hollinshead set up a 16-mm projector in front of his garage in Riverton, New Jersey, and then settled down to watch a movie. Recognizing a nation addicted to the motorcar when he saw one, Hollinshead and Willis Smith opened the world’s first drive-in movie in a forty-car parking lot in Camden on June 6, 1933. Hollinshead profited only slightly from his brainchild, however, because in 1938 the United States Supreme Court refused to hear his appeal against Loew’s Theaters, thus accepting the argument that the drive-in movie was not a patentable item. The idea never caught on in Europe, but by 1958 more than four thousand outdoor screens dotted the American landscape. Because drive-ins offered bargain-basement prices and double or triple bills, the theaters tended to favor movies that were either second-run or second-rate. Horror films and teenage romance were the order of the night . . . Pundits often commented that there was a better show in the cars than on the screen.

In the 1960s and 1970s the drive-in movie began to slip in popularity. Rising fuel costs and a season that lasted only six months contributed to the problem, but skyrocketing land values were the main factor. When drive-ins were originally opened, they were typically out in the hinterlands. When subdivisions and shopping malls came closer, the drive-ins could not match the potential returns from other forms of investments. According to the National Association of Theater Owners, only 2,935 open-air theaters still operated in the United States in 1983, even though the total number of commercial movie screens in the nation, 18,772, was at a thirty-five-year high. The increase picked up not by the downtown and the neighborhood theaters, but by new multiscreen cinemas in shopping centers. Realizing that the large parking lots of indoor malls were relatively empty in the evening, shopping center moguls came to regard theaters as an important part of a successful retailing mix.
THE GASOLINE SERVICE STATION

The purchase of gasoline in the United States has thus far passed through five distinct epochs. The first stage was clearly the worst for the motorist, who had to buy fuel, if the bucketful at a livery stable, repair shop, or dry goods store. Occasionally, vendors sold gasoline from small tank cars which they pushed up and down the streets. In any event, the automobile owner had to pour gasoline from a bucket through a funnel into his tank. The entire procedure was inefficient, smelly, wasteful, and occasionally dangerous.

The second stage began about 1905, when C.H. Laestad of St. Louis equipped a hot-water heater with a glass gauge and a garden hose and turned the whole thing on its end. With this simple maneuver, he invented an easy way to transfer gasoline from a storage tank to an automobile without using a bucket. Later in the same year, Sylvanus F. Bowser invented a gasoline pump which automatically measured the outflow. The entire assembly was labeled a "filling station." At this stage, which lasted until about 1920, such an apparatus consisted of a single pump outside a retail store which was primarily engaged in other businesses and which provided precious few services for the motorist.

Between 1920 and 1950, service stations entered into a third phase and became, as a group, one of the most widespread kinds of commercial buildings in the United States. Providing under one roof all the functions of gasoline distribution and normal automotive maintenance, these full-service structures were often built in the form of little colonial houses, Greek temples, Chinese pagodas, and Art Deco palaces. Many were local landmarks and a source of community pride.

After 1935 the gasoline station evolved again, this time into a more homogeneous entity that was standardized across the entire country and that reflected the mass-marketing techniques of billion-dollar oil companies. Some of the more familiar designs were innovative or memorable, such as the drum-like Mobil station by New York architect Frederick Frost, which featured a dramatically curving facade while conveying the corporate identity. Another popular service station style was the Texaco design of Walter Dorwin Teague, smooth white exterior with elegant trim and the familiar red star and bold red lettering. Whatever the product or design, the stations tended to be operated by a single entrepreneur and represented an important part of small business in American life.

The fifth stage of gasoline-station development began in the 1970s, with the slow demise of the traditional service-station businessman. New gasoline outlets were of two types. The first was the super station, often owned and operated by the oil companies themselves. Most featured a combination of self-service and full-service pumping consoles, as well as fully equipped "car care centers." Service areas were separated from the pumping sections so that the two functions would not interfere with each other. Mechanics never broke off work to sell gas.

The more pervasive second type might be termed the "mini-mart station." The operators of such establishments have now gone full circle since the early twentieth century. Typically, they know nothing about automobiles and expect the customers themselves to pump the gasoline. Thus, "the man who wears the star" has given way to the teenager who sells six-packs, bags of ice, and pre-prepared sandwiches.

THE SHOPPING CENTER

Large-scale retailing, long associated with central business districts, began moving away from the urban cores between the world wars. The first experiments to capture the growing suburban retail markets were made by major department stores in New York and Chicago in the 1920s.

Another threat to the primacy of the central business district was the "string street" or "shopping strip," which emerged in the 1920s and which was designed to serve vehicular rather than pedestrian traffic. These bypass roads encouraged city dwellers with cars to patronize businesses on the outskirts of town. Short parades of shops could already have been found near the streetcar and rapid transit stops, but as has been noted, these new retailing thoroughfares generally radiated out from the city business district toward low-density, residential areas, functionally dominating the urban street system. They were the prototypes for the familiar highway strips of the 1980s which stretch far into the countryside.

[...]

The concept of the enclosed, climate-controlled mall, first introduced at the Southdale Shopping Center near Minneapolis in 1956, added to the suburban advantage.

During the 1970s, a new phenomenon – the super regional mall – added a more elaborate twist to sub-
urban shopping. Prototypical of the new breed was Tyson’s Corner, on the Washington Beltway in Fairfax County, Virginia. Anchored by Bloomingdale’s, it did over $165 million in business in 1983 and provided employment to more than 14,000 persons. Even larger was Long Island’s Roosevelt Field, a 180-store, 2.2 million square foot megamall that attracted 275,000 visitors a week and did $230 million in business in 1980. Most elaborate of all was Houston’s Galleria, a world-famed setting for 240 prestigious boutiques, a quartet of cinemas, 26 restaurants, an Olympic-sized ice-skating pavilion, and two luxury hotels. There were few windows in these mausoleums of merchandising, and clocks were rarely seen – just as in gambling casinos.

Boosters of such megamalls argue that they are taking the place of the old central business districts and becoming the identifiable collecting points for the rootless families of the newer areas. As weekend and afternoon attractions, they have a special lure for teenagers, who often go there on shopping dates or to see the opposite sex. As one official noted in 1971: “These malls are now their street corners. The new shopping centers have killed the little merchant, closed most movies, and are now supplanting the older shopping centers in the suburbs.” They are also especially attractive to mothers with young children and to the elderly, many of whom visit regularly to get out of the house without having to worry about crime or inclement weather.

[...]

THE HOUSE TRAILER AND MOBILE HOME

The phenomenon of a nation on wheels is perhaps best symbolized by the uniquely American development of the mobile home. “Trailers are here to stay,” predicted the writer Howard O’Brien in 1936. Although in its infancy at that time, the mobile-home industry has flourished in the United States. The house trailer itself came into existence in the teens of this century as an individually designed variation on a truck or a car, and it began to be produced commercially in the 1920s. Originally, trailers were designed to travel, and they were used primarily for vacation purposes. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, however, many people, especially salesmen, entertainers, construction workers, and farm laborers, were forced into a nomadic way of life as they searched for work, any work. They found that these temporary trailers on rubber tires provided the necessary shelter while also meeting their economic and migratory requirements. Meanwhile, Wally Byam and other designers were streamlining the mobile home into the classic tear-drop form made famous by Airstream.

During World War II, the United States government got into the act by purchasing tens of thousands of trailers for war workers and by forbidding their sale to the general public. By 1943 the National Housing Agency alone owned 35,000 of the aluminum boxes, and more than 60 percent of the nation’s 200,000 mobile homes were in defense areas...

Not until the mid-1950s did the term “mobile home” begin to refer to a place where respectable people could marry, mature, and die. By then it was less a “mobile” than a “manufactured” home. No longer a trailer, it became a modern industrialized residence with almost all the accoutrements of a normal house. By the late 1950s, widths were increased to ten feet, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) began to recognize the mobile home as a type of housing suitable for mortgage insurance, and the maturities on sales contracts were increased from three to five years.

In the 1960s, twelve-foot widths were introduced, and then fourteen, and manufacturers began to add fireplaces, skylights, and cathedral ceilings. In 1967 two trailers were attached side by side to form the first “double wide.” These new dimensions allowed for a greater variety of room arrangement and became particularly attractive to retired persons with fixed incomes. They also made the homes less mobile. By 1979 even the single-width “trailer” could be seventeen feet wide (by about sixty feet long), and according to the Manufactured Housing Institute, fewer than 2 percent were ever being moved from their original site. Partly as a result of this increasing permanence, individual communities and the courts began to define the structures as real property and thus subject to real estate taxes rather than as motor vehicles subject only to license fees.

Although it continued to be popularly perceived as a shabby substitute for “stick” housing (a derogatory word used to describe the ordinary American balloon-frame dwelling), the residence on wheels reflected American values and industrial practices. Built with easily machined and processed materials, such as sheet metal and plastic, it represented a total consumer
package, complete with interior furnishings, carpets, and appliances. More importantly, it provided a suburban-type alternative to the inner-city housing that would otherwise have been available to blue-collar workers, newly married couples, and retired persons...

A DRIVE-IN SOCIETY

Drive-in motels, drive-in movies, and drive-in shopping facilities were only a few of the many new institutions that followed in the exhaust of the internal-combustion engine. By 1984 mom-and-pop grocery stores had given way almost everywhere to supermarkets, most banks had drive-in windows, and a few funeral homes were making it possible for mourners to view the deceased, sign the register, and pay their respects without emerging from their cars. Odessa Community College in Texas even opened a drive-through registration window.

Particularly pervasive were fast-food franchises, which not only decimated the family-style restaurants but cut deeply into grocery store sales. In 1915, James G. Huneker, a raconteur whose tales of early twentieth-century American life were compiled as New Cosmopolis, complained of the infusion of cheap, quick-fire “food hells,” and of the replacement of relaxed dining with “canned music and automatic lunch taverns.” With the automobile came the notion of “grabbing” something to eat. The first drive-in restaurant, Royce Hailey’s Pig Stand, opened in Dallas in 1921, and later in the decade, the first fast-food franchise, “White Tower,” decided that families touring in motorcars needed convenient meals along the way. The places had to look clean, so they were painted white. They had to be familiar, so a minimal menu was standardized at every outlet. To catch the eye, they were built like little castles, replete with fake ramps and turrets. And to forestall any problem with a land lease, the little white castles were built to be moveable.

The biggest restaurant operation of all began in 1954, when Ray A. Kroch, a Chicago area milkshake-machine salesman, joined forces with Richard and Maurice McDonald, the owners of a fast-food emporium in San Bernardino, California. In 1955 the first of Mr. Kroch’s “McDonald’s” outlets was opened in Des Plaines, a Chicago suburb long famous as the site of an annual Methodist encampment. The second and third, both in California, opened later in 1955... [T]he McDonald’s enterprise is based on free parking and drive-in access, and its methods have been copied by dozens of imitators. Late in 1964, on an interstate highway north of Minneapolis, McDonald’s began construction of the most complete drive-in complex in the world. To be called McStop, it will feature a motel, gas station, convenience store, and, of course, a McDonald’s restaurant...

THE CENTERLESS CITY

More than anyplace else, California became the symbol of the postwar suburban culture. It pioneered the boom in sports cars, foreign cars, vans, and motor homes, and by 1964 its 26 million citizens owned almost 19 million motor vehicles and had access to the world’s most extensive freeway system. The result has been a new type of centerless city, best exemplified by once sleepy and out-of-the-way Orange County, just south and east of Los Angeles. After Walt Disney came down from Hollywood, bought out the ranchers, and opened Disneyland in 1955, Orange County began to evolve from a rural backwater into a suburb and then into a collection of medium and small towns. It had never had a true urban focus, in large part because its oil-producing sections each spawned independent suburban centers, none of which was particularly dominant over the others. The tradition continued when the area became a subdivision’s dream in the 1960s and 1970s. By 1980 there were twenty-six Orange County cities, none with more than 225,000 residents. Like the begats of the Book of Genesis, they merged and multiplied into a huge agglomeration of two million people with its own Census Bureau metropolitan area designation—Anaheim, Santa Ana, Garden Grove. Unlike the traditional American metropolitan region, however, Orange County lacked a commutation focus, a place that could obviously be accepted as the center of local life. Instead, the experience of a local resident was typical: “I live in Garden Grove, work in Irvine, shop in Santa Ana, go to the dentist in Anaheim, my husband works in Long Beach, and I used to be the president of the League of Women Voters in Fullerton.”

A centerless city also developed in Santa Clara County, which lies forty-five miles south of San Francisco and which is best known as the home of
silicon valley. stretching from palo alto on the north
to the garlic and lettuce fields of Gilroy to the south,
Santa Clara County has the world's most extensive
concentration of electronics concerns. in 1940, how-
however, it was best known for prunes and apricots, and
it was not until after World War II that its largest city,
San Jose, also became the nation's largest suburb. With
fewer than 70,000 residents in 1940, San Jose exploded
to 636,000 by 1980, superseding San Francisco as the
region's largest municipality.

the numbers were larger in California, but the
pattern was the same on the edges of every American
city, from buffalo grove and Schaumburg near Chicago,
to Germantown and Collierville near Memphis, to
Creve Coeur and Ladue near St. Louis. And perhaps
more important than the growing number of people
living outside of city boundaries was the sheer physical
sprawl of metropolitan areas. Between 1950 and 1970,
the urbanized area of Washington, DC, grew from
181 to 523 square miles, of Miami from 116 to 429,
while in the larger megalopolises of New York,
Chicago, and Los Angeles, the region of settlement
was measured in the thousands of square miles.

THE DECENTRALIZATION OF FACTORIES
AND OFFICES

The deconcentration of post-World War II American
cities was not simply a matter of split-level homes and
neighborhood schools. It involved almost every facet
of national life, from manufacturing to shopping to
professional services. Most importantly, it involved the
location of the workplace, and the erosion of the
concept of suburb as a place from which wage-earners
commuted daily to jobs in the center. So far had the
trend progressed by 1970 that in nine of the fifteen
largest metropolitan areas suburbs were the principal
sources of employment, and in some cities, like San
Francisco, almost three-fourths of all work trips were
by people who neither lived nor worked in the core.
In Wilmington, Delaware, 66 percent of area jobs
in 1940 were in the core city; by 1970, the figure had
dropped below one-quarter. And despite the fact that
Manhattan contained the world's highest concentration of office space and business activity, in 1970,
only 78 percent of the residents in the New York
suburbs also worked in the suburbs. Many outlying
communities thus achieved a kind of autonomy from
the older downtown areas.

Manufacturing is now among the most dispersed
of nonresidential activities. As the proportion of indus-
trial jobs in the united states work force fell from
29 percent to 23 percent of the total in the 1970s, those
manufacturing enterprises that survived often re-
located either to the suburbs or to the lower-cost South
and West.

Office functions, once thought to be securely
anchored to the streets of big cities, have followed the
suburban trend. In the nineteenth century, businesses
tried to keep all their operations under one centralized
roof. It was the most efficient way to run a company
when the mails were slow and uncertain and communi-
cation among employees was limited to the distance
that a human voice could carry. More recently, the
economics of real estate and a revolution in communica-
tions have changed these circumstances, and many
companies are now balkanizing their accounting
departments, data-processing divisions, and billing
departments. Just as insurance companies, branch
banks, regional sales staffs, and doctors' offices have
reduced their costs and presumably increased their
accessibility by moving to suburban locations, so also
have back-office functions been splitting away from
front offices and moving away from central business
districts.

[...]

Since World War II, the American people have
experienced a transformation of the manmade
environment around them. Commercial, residential,
and industrial structures have been redesigned to fit
the needs of the motorist rather than the pedestrian.
Garish signs, large parking lots, one-way streets, drive-
in windows, and throw-away fast-food buildings—all
associated with the world of suburbia—have replaced
the slower-paced, neighborhood-oriented institutions
of an earlier generation. Some observers of the auto-
mobile revolution have argued that the car has created
a new and better urban environment and that the
change in spatial scale, based upon swift transportation,
has formed a new kind of organic entity, speeding up
personal communication and rendering obsolete the older urban settings. Lewis Mumford,
writing from his small-town retreat in Amenia, New
York, has emphatically disagreed. His prize-winning
book, The City in History, was a celebration of the
medieval community and an exoration of "the
formless urban exudation" that he saw American
cities becoming. He noted that the automobile mega-
lopolis was not a final stage in city development but an
anti-city which "annihilates the city whenever it collides with it."

There are some signs that the halcyon days of the drive-in culture and automobile are behind us. More than one hundred thousand gasoline stations, or about one-third of the American total, have been eliminated in the last decade. Empty tourist courts and boarded-up motels are reminders that the fast pace of change can make commercial structures obsolete within a quarter-century of their erection. Even that suburban bellwether, the shopping center, which revolutionized merchandising after World War II, has come to seem small and out-of-date as newer covered malls attract both the trendy and the family trade. Some older centers have been recycled as bowling alleys or industrial buildings, and some have been remodeled to appeal to larger tenants and better-behaved customers. But others stand forlorn and boarded up. Similarly, the characteristic fast-food emporiums of the 1950s, with uniformed "car hops" who took orders at the automobile window, are now relics of the past. One of the survivors, Delores Drive-in, which opened in Beverly Hills in 1946, was recently proposed as an historic landmark, a sure sign that the species is in danger.