

# America's Rush to Suburbia

By Kenneth T. Jackson

This week in Istanbul, experts from around the globe are attending a United Nations conference on urbanization. The timing is propitious, because in the next few years the world will pass a historic milestone. For the first time, half the earth's population, or more than three billion people, will be living in cities.

At the turn of the century, only 14 percent of us called a city home and just 11 places on the planet had a million inhabitants. Now there are 400 cities with populations of at least one million and 20 megacities of more than 10 million.

But while cities around the world are becoming denser, those in the United States are moving in the opposite direction. The typical model here is a doughnut -- emptiness and desolation at the center and growth on the edges.

Many of the great downtown department stores -- including Hudson's in Detroit and Goldsmith's in Memphis -- are now closed.

Meanwhile, new megamalls, discount centers and factory outlets are springing up every day on the peripheries of America's cities.

Though some cities are still thriving, of the 25 largest cities in 1950, 18 have lost population. For example, from 1950 to 1990, Baltimore lost 22 percent of its population, Philadelphia 23 percent, Chicago 25 percent, Boston 28 percent, Detroit 44 percent and Cleveland 45 percent. (It's true that many cities -- Houston, San Diego, Dallas and Phoenix, among them -- have grown since 1950, but that is largely because they have annexed their outlying territories. New York City, unique as always, has the same number of people, although its boundaries are unchanged.)

By contrast, during the same period, the suburbs gained more than 75 million people. In 1990, our nation became the first in history to have more suburbanites than city and rural dwellers combined. Why should Americans care whether Portland, Me., or Portland, Ore., is losing inhabitants? Because our system of governance balkanizes social responsibility in our country, a nation divided by race and income.

Only in America are schools, police and fire protection and other services financed largely by local taxes. When middle- and upper-class families flee from the cities, they take with them needed tax revenues.

In Europe, Australia and Japan, such functions are essentially the responsibility of national or at least regional governments. In any of these places, moving from a city to a suburb does not have much impact on a citizen's taxes or on the quality of services. Americans tend to regard a move to the suburbs as natural -- even inevitable -- when people are given choices about where to live. But in fact the pattern arises not because land is abundant and cheap (which it is) and not because we have racial and economic divides (which we do) but largely because we have made a series of public policy decisions that other countries have not made.

First, the tax code allows us to deduct mortgage interest and property taxes for both first and second

homes. Most other advanced nations do not allow this.

Second, gasoline is essentially not taxed in this country. The 12-country European Union, which has fewer vehicles on the road than the United States does, takes in more than five times as much in gasoline taxes as America does. Our gasoline is cheap compared to that in other advanced industrialized nations, so living in the suburbs, without public transportation, is an attractive option.

Third, the United States has long had a policy, unique in the developed world, of making the provision of public housing voluntary. For the most part, communities across the country can choose to apply -- or not -- for public housing. The result of this is that the central cities have become the homes of the poor while the suburbs have become places to escape the poor.

By contrast, the French, British, Germans and Japanese spread public housing around. Indeed, in many countries a demonstrably higher proportion of public housing units go to the periphery than to central city -- and this discourages middle-class urban flight.

Finally, in the United States, government at all levels has affected cities by what it has not done. In Europe, land is regarded as a scarce resource that has to be controlled in the public interest rather than exploited for private gain. Thus, governments have acted to preserve open space and deter suburban sprawl.

There are other policies, too, that work against urban areas in the United States, but the larger point is clear: American cities operate under a series of unusual handicaps.

St. Louis offers an extreme example of the consequences of all this. Once the fourth largest city in the nation, the so-called Gateway to the West has become a ghost of its former self. In 1950, it had 857,000 people; by 1990, the population had dwindled to 397,000. Many of its old neighborhoods have become dispiriting collections of eviscerated homes and vacant lots. Aging warehouses and grimy loft factories are now open to the sky; weeds cover once busy railroad sidings.

Will the experience of St. Louis, become typical of other cities in the 21st century?

In recent years, such prominent authors as Paul Hawken, John Naisbitt and Alvin Toffler have predicted that cities are doomed and that new telecommunications have made human interaction unnecessary. In the future, they suggest, our journey to work will be from the breakfast table to the home computer. There, in splendid isolation, we will work, shop and play in cyberspace.

Perhaps the futurists are correct, and the cities of our time, like conquered Carthage, will be razed and sowed with salt.

But I doubt it. It is more likely that New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston and a dozen or so other places will remain great cities well into the next millennium, despite government policies that cripple them.

That's because the same catalytic mixing of people that creates urban problems and fuels urban conflict also spurs the initiative, innovation and collaboration that taken together move civilization forward. Quite simply, metropolitan centers are the most complex creations of the human mind, and they will not easily yield their roles as marketplaces of ideas.

Cities are places where individuals of different bents and pursuits rub shoulders, where most human

achievements have been created. Whereas village and rural life, as well as life in the modern shopping mall, is characterized by the endless repetition of similar events, cities remain centers of diversity and opportunity. If they express some of the worst tendencies of modern society, they also represent much of the best.

As Charles E. Merriam, a professor at the University of Chicago, told the United States Conference of Mayors in 1934: "The trouble with Lot's wife was that she looked backward and saw Sodom and Gomorrah. If she had looked forward, she would have seen that heaven is also a pictured as a city."

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