

How Suburbia Happened

Although suburbanization is now seen in many cities across the globe, it remains a uniquely American cultural feature. A middle-ground between cities and the country-side, the suburbs reflect many ideals and freedoms of the American dream. The origins of the American landscape, however, can be traced to certain policies and ideas which were actualized in the early parts of the 20th century.

Federal Housing Administration

Although in 19th century American society, having a mortgage was uncommon and stigmatized, the rising costs and increasing debts following WWI made such mortgages necessary. During the Great Depression of the 1930's, and in an effort to save American homes from foreclosure, the American government would enact the Federal Housing Administration to insure home loans made by private lenders as well as to alleviate unemployment in the construction industry. Long-term mortgage loans to private lenders granted by the FHA extended repayment periods, and reduced monthly payments and interest rates through government guarantee. The consequence of these FHA loans was to "substantially increase the number of American families who could reasonably expect to purchase homes"¹. With a bias towards homogenous subdivisions rather than industrial, aging or heterogenous neighborhoods, The FHA made it cheaper for middle-class American families to buy homes outside of cities than to rent. Furthermore, in an attempt to improve housing standards and conditions, FHA policy explicitly rated racially diverse neighborhoods as undesirable for investors and lenders, reflecting the racist tendencies of the era that infiltrated policy and contributed greatly to the segregation of black and white Americans. These policies were exclusionary, encouraging white, middle-class homebuyers to settle outside of dense, heterogenous regions.

Therefore, white middle-class American families deserted urban centers and cities, as FHA policies encouraged re-settlement in the suburbs. Government funds and support began focusing on developing suburbs, which encouraged the decay of inner-city neighborhoods.

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The individualism and independence-seeking qualities of American cultural identity are reflected in the federal subsidy of home loans for middle-class Americans. The government reinforced the belief that the average American should have the ability to own his own home, by subsidizing home loans. FHA policies reinforced purchasing a home as a right, rather than a privilege. The vast expanse of land available in the US is a resource that allowed Americans to seek, for many years, greater and greater freedom and separation from the undesirable congestion and discomforts of urban life. Although it may be a universal natural inclination to seek the "psychic value of privacy or castlehood"<sup>1</sup> this dream is seldom actualized as it has been in US. Only in a \country like the US could a society "afford the wastefulness of low-density housing on the metropolitan fringe"<sup>1</sup>.

### The Garden City

The mid-century, middle-class white American family sought, whether consciously or not, to distance itself from communal living<sup>1</sup> while the government supported it financially. A certain distrust of cities and urbanity reflected in suburbanizing policies and development patterns find their roots in planning concepts originating in the UK. The much-smaller country was plagued by severe congestion from industrialization by the 19th century. In response, British thinkers and planners devised The Garden City concept which advocated for eventual removal of city conditions by creating secluded, private enclaves for residences. People who disliked city conditions could escape to lush, low-density landscapes with homes hidden

within greens. These residences would connect to each other and to cities through highways. The Garden City concept heavily influenced planning in the US; a country with much greater expanses of land and less prevalent urban problems than the UK. Seeking to emulate the Garden Cities of the UK, American planners believed it virtuous to abolish urban streets entirely.

Thus began the pattern of population dispersion that persists in America today, of many previously-lively and densely populated cities being abandoned by the middle and upper classes and left to decay without government funds or support. Seeking quiet back-country escapes from the density of cities, homeowners with the means could purchase private, single-family homes whose location and proximity to daily necessities would privilege automobile travel over any other alternative. The belief that Americans should have the freedom to go anywhere and do anything from their suburban homes has led to a sprawl that encompasses greater and greater areas of land at low densities. Suburbanization is a reflection and a reinforcer of idealized American values. The American individualist, freedom-seeking ethos has been a hallmark of our culture. And the American dream was made a tangible possibility by policy-makers, investors, lenders, and home-buyers who shared in the same dream. Their policies, investments, and dollars reflected the freedom to actualize their ideals.

However, the desire to expand horizons, seek greater and greater freedom by domesticating wider expanses of land, proved, by the middle of the century, to be creating problems that have plagued the American landscape for years now. Ultimately, suburban flight would result in "a low-grade uniform environment"<sup>2</sup> with homogeneous construction and without the cultural and historical complexity of cities. What has been attempted since to alleviate the environmental, social and physical consequences

of suburbia represents the next step in our cultural understanding of the built environment.



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1. Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier; The suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. Print.

2. Mumford, Lewis. *The City in History, its Transformations, and Its Prospects*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1961. Print



## Planned community

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

A **planned community**, or **planned city**, is any community that was carefully planned from its inception and is typically constructed in a previously undeveloped area. This contrasts with settlements that evolve in a more *ad hoc* fashion. Land use conflicts are less frequent in planned communities since they are planned carefully.

Several of the world's capital cities are planned cities, including Washington, D.C., in the United States, Canberra in Australia, Brasilia in Brazil, New Delhi in India, Abuja in Nigeria, Astana in Kazakhstan and Islamabad in Pakistan.