maintain a small-town neighborhood but also the patterns of development that provide an ecologically-sound suburban alternative to continued sprawl development (Article 33, "Principles of New Urbanism"). New Urbanism communities feature homes with front porches (Article 34, "Rocking-Chair Revival: Nostalgic Front Porch Makes a Comeback in a New Century"), pleasant walkable paths, few driveways that impair walkability, traffic-calming measures, clustered development to preserve open space, and emphasis on building suburban town squares and other public places.

The design principles of the New Urbanism have also been applied in the Inner city, in an effort to transform public housing and their surrounding neighborhoods. Chicago, and other cities used the federal assistance in the HOPE VI program to tear down the most distressed high-rise public housing towers, replacing them with new low-rise units of mixed-income housing (see Article 35 "HOPE VI and the New Urbanism: Eliminating Low-Income Housing to Make Mixed-Income Communities"). The subsidized low-income housing units were "blended in" and made indistinguishable from market-rate units. Public spaces in the project were also given attractive design in a further effort to promote community building.

Critics counter that as wonderful as New Urbanism communities are, they simply do not provide an answer for such problems as suburban sprawl. Few Americans live in New Urban communities. Developers will continue to build, and Americans will continue to buy, homes in more conventional suburbs, with their continued reliance on the automobile.

Urbanists hope that regionalism, or the effective inter-governmental cooperation of communities within the metropolis, will help provide an answer to many of the problems of the burgeoning metropolis. In the 1950s and 1960s, many academic urban experts pushed for the creation of new metropolitan-wide governments. A few actually were created, or, to be more accurate, a few regional governments were created, but none were given full governing authority over the region. In most metropolitan areas, suburbs simply sought the preservation of their autonomy; their residents did not wish to cede power to new metropolitan authorities over which they would have little direct control.

In more recent years, regional reformers have come to recognize the necessity of creating new metropolitan authorities to pursue metropolitan restructuring. New regionalism looks for post-urban regional action and coalition of suburban communities. Myron Perry, a suburban scholar, is the leading advocate of the "new regionalism". Perry argues for the development of "new" metropolitan communities that will Grow Slow and not quickly, and that will be designed to coexist with suburban communities, allowing for a mix of residential and commercial uses.

The Six Suburban Eras of the United States

ROBERT LANG, JENNIFER LEFURGY, AND ARTHUR C. NELSON

Introduction

The Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech (MI) proposes a timeline to show the flow of suburban eras and types. The timeline defines six periods of U.S. suburban development in order to establish more common base years for historical data analysis. As the flow of suburban studies matures into a formal academic sub-discipline, these suggested eras can help guide research projects.

The current standard split in suburban history, proposed by New Urbanists such as Andres Duany, offers a rather crude division into pre- and post-WWII periods (Duany, Pletter-Zyberk, and Speck 2000). But this simple pre/post-war dichotomy is a caricature of suburban history. It can be argued that a suburban era actually spans the immediate pre- and post-war decades, which are labeled "Mid-Century Suburbs" (or the years 1950 to 1970) in this note. In addition, the post-war period is now so long, at 50 plus years, that it太 can be divided into eras. Consider, for example an article by Robert Lang, Edward Blakely, and Meghan Gough (2005) that looks at the "new suburban metropolitan" period from 1970 to 2010.

This timeline is not meant to be definitive. There are no clear breaks in history. Thus the timeline is depicted as a meandering river to indicate the continuous flow of events. The dates show steps along the way where the river course shifts, implying a directional change in history.

This note divides American suburban history into six eras. It finds that the United States is now in the fifth era and will soon enter a sixth one. The timeline also indicates some exemplar suburbs of each period and touches on key political changes and technological innovations. However, this argument does not subscribe to the notion of technological or economic determinism. Previous efforts to categorize historic eras focused especially on advances in transit technology (Stern and Massengale 1981), but multiple forces propel suburban change, and this proposed timeline also considers how cultural influences shaped the course of evolution.

The timeline reflects current thinking on the suburbs and incorporates the work of many historians including James

Boeche" (1996), Robert Fishman (1987, 1990), Dolores Hayden (2003), Kenneth Jackson (1985), Chester Lieb (1985), Richard Longstreth (1998, 1999), and Sam Bass Warner, Jr. (1962, 1972). The understanding of the three later eras is driven mostly by the current work of researchers at MI and the Brookings Institution’s Metropolitan Policy Program. The labels attached to these eras were developed by MI and reflect its conceptualization of how the suburbs have evolved since the mid-19th century.

Before 1850: Proto Suburbs

Prior to 1850, U.S. suburbs were mostly extensions of cities (Jackson 1985, Warner 1972). They featured street plans and housing that closely resembled the urban core. In this era, the urban fringe featured dense row houses that abruptly gave way to open fields and farms. However, some historians have documented the fact that the residents of early U.S. suburbs such as Brooklyn already had a different demographic character than residents of the central city (Jackson 1985). At first, these borderlands were poorer than the core. But with the introduction of ferry service around New York Harbor, neighborhoods such as Brooklyn Heights emerged that catered to middle-income commuters. Henry C. Binford (1988) finds a similar development pattern at the fringe of Boston in the first half of the 19th century.

The earliest distinctly non-urban looking suburbs began in the United Kingdom in the early 19th century (Fishman 1987). They appeared first in London (Clapham Common—1800) and later Manchester (Victoria Park—1830s). These same kinds of "picturesque" suburbs did not emerge in the United States until the second half of the 19th century.

1850 to 1890: Town and Country Suburbs

The notion of suburbs as distinct physical places from cities became evident in the United States by the 1850s (Fishman 1987). The earliest documented English-style American suburb was Llewellyn Park, NJ, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted.
in 1857. Olmsted’s work captured in design and spirit an entire mid-19th century U.S. movement that elevated domesticity and the nuclear family. This movement, along with the picturesque landscape architecture, had its roots in England.

But note that we do not refer to this suburban era as “picturesque” as some others have (Hayden 2003). That is because these suburbs are only part of the suburban story of the period. The flip side of the affluent picturesque places was a more moderate-income and city-like suburb based on horse-drawn streetcars (Hayden 2003). These streetcars were a big improvement over horse-drawn omnibuses because they were faster and carried more load (Warner 1962). They helped change the course of urban development in places such as New York, where suburbs now spread north on Manhattan Island instead of only crossing the East River to Brooklyn (Jackson 1985).

The horse-drawn streetcar suburbs were much denser and more traditionally urban that their picturesque counterparts—thus they were the “town” in the “town and country suburbs.” But they also were now distinct from the urban core. In places such as the Jamaica Plains neighborhood of Boston, the architecture began to shift in the 1850s from the tight row houses such as those found on Beacon Hill to a looser configuration with side alleys (Warner 1962). In many cases, the houses were fully detached but remained on small narrow lots. To a modern eye, this does not seem as important a distinction, but it signaled a much larger change. Also note that many of the “town” suburbs had been annexed by the central city and appeared for all intents and purposes to be “urban neighborhoods” (Rusk 1993). Yet in the context of the mid-to-late 19th century American metropolis, these places were suburbs. The best example of a neighborhood built in this style was Gross Park in Chicago, dating from the 1880s (Hayden 2003).

1890 to 1930: Streetcar Suburbs

By the late 1880s, the first electric streetcars—or trolleys—were in use. The trolleys were a turbo version of the horse-drawn streetcars (Warner 1962). They were much bigger and faster and helped spread development for miles past the old urban core. Many of the trends that began in the horse-drawn era were greatly accentuated and extended by trolleys—the suburban houses spread out more (especially in places such as Los Angeles) and differences between the look and feel of the edge and the core grew (Fishman 1987). The streetcars so dominated the construction and speculation of this period that many historians use them to label this suburban era (Warner 1962).

Suburban diversity, which began in earlier eras, continues and intensifies with the emergence of large-scale residential “city suburbs” (Borchert 1996).

Suburban retail and commercial districts also began to change radically in the streetcar suburbs (Liebs 1985). The old, dense form of Main Street now took on an elongated appearance. Storefronts stretched to reflect the fact that people might now window shop from a fast-moving trolley. These extended main streets, also referred to as “taxpayer strips,” were the forerunner of the auto-based strip (Liebs 1985; Lang, LeFurgy, and Hornburg 2005). Many of these places exist today, threading through the edges of central cities and older suburbs, and are to the modern eye “traditional looking.” But in their era, these strips represented a sharp break with commercial districts in the urban core.

Automobiles were invented around the same time as trolleys, but had much less immediate impact on urban development in the early years of the 20th century. They were expensive, hard to store, and poorly accommodated in urban places. Yet the streetcars began to loosen up the American metropolis so effectively that cars began to find navigating suburbs easier with each passing year. The first commercial districts to begin building parking lots were the trolley-based taxpayer strips. By the 1920s, the west side of Los Angeles began to develop fully auto-based shopping (Longstreth 1998, 1999).

1930 to 1970: Mid-Century Suburbs

Key developments during this era include the creation of Federal Housing Administration loans in the 1930s, which greatly improved middle-income access to suburban housing, and the beginning of the interstate highways in 1956 (Jackson 1985). Suburban architecture grew even more distinct from both traditional urban and even earlier suburbs (Hayden 2003). The dominant housing type was the single-story ranch-style home with a minimally classic exterior and a modern open floor plan. The scale of development expanded, especially after World War II in projects such as Levittown and Lakewood (Hayden 2003). The modest suburban shopping centers of the early 20th century exploded into massive malls that, beginning in 1956, were mostly enclosed and climate-controlled (Liebs 1985).

The New Urbanists, such as Andres Duany (Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck 2000) and James Kunstler (1993), argue that a clean break in history exists between the pre- and post-World War II eras. In their view, all development before the war was pedestrian-oriented and traditional in form. After the war came an auto-dominated environment of subdivisions and shopping malls. However, the historical literature does not support this simplistic view (Harris 1988) and instead indicates that many early 20th century suburbs began a slow, decades-long adoption of automobiles (Liebs 1985). By the 1930s, cars were poised to significantly remake the American metropolis, but first a depression and then war greatly slowed the pace of urban change (Jackson 1985). Yet in the few places that still grew during the depression and war, such as the Los Angeles and Washington, DC, regions, the car made its mark (Longstreth 1998, 1999). These places, along with select parts of suburban New York, contain many examples of 1930s auto suburbs complete with proto tract-style subdivisions and early auto-oriented shopping centers.

Thus, a new suburban style emerged at the mid-20th century. This style existed both immediately before and after the war. There is just so much more development occurring after the war, that Mid-Century Suburbs were said to have a “post-war” style.
1930 to 1970: Mid-Century Suburbs

Key developments during this era include the creation of Federal Housing Administration loans in the 1930s, which greatly improved middle-income access to suburban housing, and the beginning of interstate highways in 1956 (Jackson 1985). Suburban architecture grew even more distinct from both traditional urban and even earlier suburbs (Hayden 2003). The dominant housing type was the one-story ranch-style home with a modern open floor plan. The scale of development expanded, especially after World War II in projects such as Levittown and Lakewood (Hayden 2003). The modest suburban shopping centers of the early 1950s exploded into massive malls that, beginning in 1956, were mostly enclosed and climate-controlled (Liebs 1985). The “New Urbanists,” such as Andres Duany (Duany, Piatzer-Yberk, and Speck 2000) and James Kunstler (1993), argue that a clean break in history exists between the pre- and post-World War II eras. In their view, all development before the war was pedestrian-oriented and focused on the street. After the war came an auto-dominated environment of subdivisions and shopping malls. However, the historical literature does not support this simplistic view (Harris 1988) and instead indicates that many early 20th century suburbs began a slow, decades-long adoption of automobiles (Liebs 1985). By the 1930s, cars were poised to significantly remake the American metropolitan, but first a depression and then war greatly slowed the pace of urban change. Indeed, the 1930s was a period of few places that still grew during the depression and war, such as the Los Angeles and Washington, DC, regions, the car made its mark (Longstreth 1989). In many places, along with select parts of suburban New York, contain many extensions of 1930s auto suburbs complete with proto-tract-style subdivisions and early auto-oriented shopping centers.

Suburban retail and commercial districts also began to change radically in the streetcar suburbs (Liebs 1985). The old, dense forms took the first elongated appearance. Storefronts stretched to reflect the fact that people might now window shop from a fast-moving trolley. These extended main streets, also referred to as “taxpayer strips,” were the forerunners of the Highway Eras (Lies 1985; Lang, Lefurgy; and Hombury 2005). Many of these places exist today, threading through the edges of central cities and older suburbs, and are to the modern eye “functional looking.” But in their era, these strips represented a sharp break with commercial districts in the urban core.

1970 to 2010: New Metropolis Suburbs

The interstate highways, constructed mostly in the 1960s, paved the way for a boom in suburban commercial development by the 1970s (Lang and Hombury 2005). New suburbs emerged during this period (Fishman 1990; Sharpe and Wallock 1994). The amount of suburban office space surpassed that of central cities. This rise to Edge Cities and even more commonly Edgeless Cities (Lang 2003)—a more sprawling style of commercial development. Suburbs now typically had the region’s balance of people, shopping, and business, yet they maintained a distinct non-urban look. By the late 1970s, light and brown fields (Gough 2005). The suburbs no longer had a monopoly on attracting immigrants. By the first decade of the 21st century, the suburbs equaled cities as immigrant magnets (Frey 2006). Suburban centers also attracted growing numbers of nontraditional households, including single and even gay residents (Brethkus 2003; Frey and Berube 2003). In fact, the suburbs grow so diverse in this era that a whole new language was needed to describe the multiple types of communities and their complicated forms of development.

The suburban split between upscale and more modest development, detectable even in the 19th century, intensified in this era (Gough 2005). Many older suburbs from the streetcar, and even mid-century, periods were in decline (most town and country era suburbs were annexed by central cities). The amount of suburban poverty dramatically increased in places that fall outside the “favor” quadrant (Leinberger 1997), and the most affluent wedge of the metropolis. Places in the favored quarter boomed. Newer suburbs at the edge of the region featured “McMansions” as the average house size in new construction nearly doubled from 1970 to the end of the century (Lang and Danielsen 2002). Closer-in suburbs within this quarter became cosmopolitan and competed directly with fashionable urban neighborhoods for the region’s arts and intellectual communities (Lang, Hughes, and Danielsen 1997).

2010 and beyond: Megapolitan Suburbs

A new suburban era may emerge after 2010. It likely will be characterized by an enslaging exurban belt that stretches so far from the original urban core that its residents may have a choice of directions in which to commute. For example, people live in suburbs outside Atlanta” of Florida, VA, 50 miles south of Washington, DC, now have the option of commuting south to Richmond or north to the District of Columbia or booming Northern Virginia. This suburban style emerged in the mid-20th century. This style existed both immediately before and after the war. There is just as much more development occurring after the war, that Mid-Century Suburbs were said to have a “post-war” style.

References
ANNUAL EDITIONS


---

**ROBERT E. LANG** is the Director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech and is an Associate Professor in the school’s Urban Affairs and Planning Program. He is also co-editor of *Opolis*. **JENNIFER LEFURGY** is the Deputy Director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech. Along with Robert Lang, she is authoring *Boomburbs: The Rise of America’s Accidental Cities* for the Brookings Institution Press. She is also doctoral candidate in Virginia Tech’s Urban Affairs and Planning program. **ARTHUR C. NELSON** is professor and founding director of Virginia Tech’s Urban Affairs and Planning Program at the Alexandria Center. He was formerly professor of city and regional planning, and public policy at Georgia Tech and adjunct professor of law at Georgia State University.

---