

# Transportation and Urban Growth:

## The Shaping of the American Metropolis

By Peter O. Muller

From *Focus*, Summer 1986, pp. 8-17.

In his monumental new work on the historical geography of transportation, James Vance states that geographic mobility is crucial to the successful functioning of any population cluster, and that "shifts in the availability of mobility provide, in all likelihood, the most powerful single process at work in transforming and evolving the human half of geography." Any adult urbanite who has watched the American metropolis turn inside-out over the past quarter-century can readily appreciate the significance of that maxim. In truth, the nation's largest single urban concentration today is not represented by the seven-plus million who agglomerate in New York City but rather by the 14 million who have settled in Gotham's vast, curvilinear outer city—a 50 mile-wide suburban band that stretches across Long Island, southwestern Connecticut, the Hudson Valley as far north as West Point, and most of New Jersey north of a line drawn from Trenton to Asbury Park. This latest episode of intrametropolitan deconcentration was fueled by the modern automobile and the interstate expressway. It is, however, merely the most recent of a series of evolutionary stages dating back to colonial times, wherein breakthroughs in transport technology unleashed forces that produced significant restructuring of the urban spatial form.

The emerging form and structure of the American metropolis has been traced within a framework of four transportation-related eras. Each successive growth stage is dominated by a particular movement technology and transport-network expansion process that shaped a distinctive pattern of intraurban spatial organization. The stages are the Walking/Horsecar Era (pre-1800/1890), the Electric Streetcar Era (1890-1920), the Recreational Automobile Era (1920-1945), and the Freeway Era (1945-present). As with all generalized models of this kind, there is a risk of oversimplification because the building processes of several simultaneously developing cities do not always fall into neat time-space compartments. Chicago's growth over the past 150 years, for example, reveals

numerous irregularities, suggesting that the overall metropolitan growth pattern is more complex than a simple, continuous outward thrust. Yet even after developmental ebb and flow, leapfrogging, backfilling, and other departures from the idealized scheme are considered, there still remains an acceptable correspondence between the model and reality.

Before 1850 the American city was a highly compact settlement in which the dominant means of getting about was on foot, requiring people and activities to tightly agglomerate in close proximity to one another. This usually meant less than a 30-minute walk from the center of town to any given urban point—an accessibility radius later extended to 45 minutes when the pressures of industrial growth intensified after 1830. Within this pedestrian city, recognizable activity concentrations materialized as well as the beginnings of income-based residential congregations. The latter was particularly characteristic of the wealthy, who not only walled themselves off in their large homes near the city center but also took to the privacy of horse-drawn carriages for moving about town. Those of means also sought to escape the city's noise and frequent epidemics resulting from the lack of sanitary conditions. Horse-and-carriage transportation enabled the wealthy to reside in the nearby countryside for the disease prone summer months. The arrival of the railroad in the 1830s provided the opportunity for year-round daily commuting, and by 1840 hundreds of affluent businessmen in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia were making round trips from exclusive new backside suburbs every weekday.

As industrialization and its teeming concentrations of working-class housing increasingly engulfed the mid-nineteenth century city, the deteriorating physical and social environment reinforced the desires of middle-income residents to suburbanize as well. They were unable, however, to afford the cost and time of commuting by steam train, and with the walking city now stretched to its morphological limit, their aspirations intensified the pressures to improve intraurban transport technology. Early attempts involving stagecoach-like omnibuses, cablecar systems, and steam railroads proved impractical, but by 1852 the first meaningful transit breakthrough was finally introduced in Manhattan in the form of the

horsedrawn trolley. Light street rails were easy to install, overcame the problems of muddy, unpaved roadways, and enabled horsecars to be hauled along them at speeds slightly (about five mph) faster than those of pedestrians. This modest improvement in mobility permitted the opening of a narrow belt of land at the city's edge for new home construction. Middle-income urbanites flocked to these "horsecar suburbs," which multiplied rapidly after the Civil War. Radial routes were the first to spawn such peripheral development, but the relentless demand for housing necessitated the building of cross town horsecar lines, thereby filling in the interstices and preserving the generally circular shape of the city.



*Horse-drawn trolleys in downtown Boston circa 1885.*

The less affluent majority of the urban population, however, was confined to the old pedestrian city and its bleak, high-density industrial appendages. With the massive immigration of unskilled laborers, (mostly of European origin after 1870) huge blue-collar communities sprang up around the factories. Because these newcomers to the city settled in the order in which they arrived—thereby denying them the small luxury of living in the immediate company of their fellow ethnics—social stress and conflict were repeatedly generated. With the immigrant tide continuing to pour into the nearly bursting industrial city throughout the late

nineteenth century, pressures redoubled to further improve intraurban transit and open up more of the adjacent countryside. By the late 1880s that urgently needed mobility revolution was at last in the making, and when it came it swiftly transformed the compact city and its suburban periphery into the modern metropolis.

The key to this urban transport revolution was the invention by Frank Sprague of the electric traction motor, an often overlooked innovation that surely ranks among the most important in American history. The first electrified trolley line opened in Richmond in 1888, was adopted by two dozen other big cities within a year, and by the early 1890s swept across the nation to become the dominant mode of intraurban transit. The rapidity of this innovation's diffusion was enhanced by the immediate recognition of its ability to resolve the urban transportation problem of the day: motors could be attached to existing horsecars, converting them into self-propelled vehicles powered by easily constructed overhead wires. The tripling of average speeds (to over 15 mph) that resulted from this invention brought a large band of open land beyond the city's perimeter into trolley-commuting range.



*Electric streetcar lines radiated outward from central cities, giving rise to star-shaped metropolises. Boston, circa 1915.*

The most dramatic geographic change of the Electric Streetcar Era was the swift residential development of those urban fringes, which transformed the emerging metropolis into a decidedly star-shaped spatial entity. This pattern was produced by radial streetcar corridors extending

several miles beyond the compact city's limits. With so much new space available for homebuilding within walking distance of the trolley lines, there was no need to extend trackage laterally, and so the interstices remained undeveloped. The typical streetcar suburb of the turn of this century was a continuous axial corridor whose backbone was the road carrying the trolley line (usually lined with stores and other local commercial facilities), from which "ridded residential streets fanned out for several blocks on both sides of the tracks. In general, the quality of housing and prosperity of streetcar subdivisions increased with distance from the edge of the central city. These suburban corridors were populated by the emerging, highly mobile middle class, which was already stratifying itself according to a plethora of minor income and status differences. With frequent upward (and local geographic) mobility the norm, community formation became an elusive goal, a process further retarded by the grid-settlement morphology and the reliance on the distant downtown for employment and most shopping.



Within the city, too, the streetcar sparked a spatial transformation. The ready availability and low fare of the electric trolley now provided every resident with access to the intracity circulatory system, thereby introducing truly "mass" transit to urban America in the final years of the nineteenth century.

For nonresidential activities this new ease of movement among the city's various ~arts quickly triggered the emergence of specialized land-use districts for commerce, manufacturing, and transportation, as well as the continued growth of the multipurpose central business district (CBD) that had formed after mid-century. But the greatest impact of the streetcar was on the central city's social geography, because it made possible the congregation of ethnic groups in their own neighborhoods. No longer were these moderate-income masses forced to reside in the heterogeneous jumble of rowhouses and tenements that ringed the factories. The trolley brought them the opportunity to "live with their own kind," allowing the sorting of discrete groups into their own inner-city social territories within convenient and inexpensive traveling distance of the workplace.

By World War I, the electric trolleys had transformed the tracked city into a full-fledged metropolis whose streetcar suburbs, in the larger cases, spread out more than 20 miles from the metropolitan center. It was at this point in time that intrametropolitan transportation achieved its greatest level of efficiency—that the bustling industrial city really "worked." How much closer the American metropolis might have approached optimal workability for all its residents, however, will never be known because the next urban transport revolution was already beginning to assert itself through the increasingly popular automobile. Americans took to cars as wholeheartedly as anything in the nation's long cultural history. Although Lewis Mumford and other scholars vilified the car as the destroyer of the city, more balanced assessments of the role of the automobile recognize its overwhelming acceptance for what it was—the long-awaited attainment of private mass transportation that offered users the freedom to travel whenever and wherever they chose. As cars came to the metropolis in ever greater numbers throughout the inter war decades, their major influence was twofold: to accelerate the deconcentration of population through the development of interstices bypassed during the streetcar era, and to push the suburban frontier farther into the countryside, again producing a compact, regular shaped urban entity.

While it certainly produced a dramatic impact on the urban fabric by the eve of World War II, the introduction of the automobile into the American metropolis during the 1920s and 1930s came at a leisurely pace. The earliest flurry of auto adoptions had been in rural areas, where farmers badly needed better access to local service centers. In the cities, cars were initially used for weekend outings—hence the term "Recreational Auto Era"—and some of the earliest paved roadways were landscaped parkways along scenic water routes, such as New York's pioneering Bronx River Parkway and Chicago's Lake Shore Drive. But it was into the suburbs, where growth rates were now for the first time overtaking those of the central cities, that cars made a decisive penetration throughout the prosperous 1920s. In fact, the rapid expansion of automobile suburbia by 1930 so adversely affected the metropolitan public transportation system that, through significant diversions of streetcar and commuter rail passengers, the large cities began to feel the negative effects of the car years before the auto's actual arrival in the urban center. By facilitating the opening of unbuilt areas lying between suburban rail axes, the automobile effectively lured residential developers away from densely populated traction-line corridors into the suddenly accessible interstices. Thus, the suburban homebuilding industry no longer found it necessary to subsidize privately-owned streetcar companies to provide low-fare access to trolley line housing tracts. Without this financial underpinning, the modern urban transit crisis quickly began to surface.



*Afternoon commuters converge at the tunnel leading out of central Boston, 1948.*

The new recreational motorways also helped to intensify the decentralization of the population. Most were radial highways that penetrated deeply

into the suburban ring and provided weekend motorists with easy access to this urban countryside. There they obviously were impressed by what they saw, and they soon responded in massive numbers to the sales pitches of suburban subdivision developers. The residential development of automobile suburbia followed a simple formula that was devised in the prewar years and greatly magnified in scale after 1945. The leading motivation was developer profit from the quick turnover of land, which was acquired in large parcels, subdivided, and auctioned off. Understandably, developers much preferred open areas at the metropolitan fringe, where large packages of cheap land could readily be assembled. Silently approving and underwriting this uncontrolled spread of residential suburbia were public policies at all levels of government: financing road construction, obligating lending institutions to invest in new homebuilding, insuring individual mortgages, and providing low-interest loans to FHA and VA clients.

Because automobility removed most of the pre-existing movement constraints, suburban social geography now became dominated by locally homogeneous income-group clusters that isolated themselves from dissimilar neighbors. Gone was the highly localized stratification of streetcar suburbia. In its place arose a far more dispersed, increasingly fragmented residential mosaic to which builders were only too eager to cater, helping shape a kaleidoscopic settlement pattern by shrewdly constructing the most expensive houses that could be sold in each locality. The continued partitioning of suburban society was further legitimized by the widespread adoption of zoning (legalized in 1916), which gave municipalities control over lot and building standards that, in turn, assured dwelling prices that would only attract newcomers whose incomes at least equaled those of the existing local population. Among the middle class, particularly, these exclusionary economic practices were enthusiastically supported, because such devices extended to them the ability of upper-income groups to maintain their social distance from people of lower socioeconomic status.

Nonresidential activities were also suburbanizing at an increasing rate during the Recreational Auto Era. Indeed, many large-scale manufacturers had decentralized during the streetcar era, choosing

locations in suburban freight-rail corridors. These corridors rapidly spawned surrounding working-class towns that became important satellites of the central city in the emerging metropolitan constellation. During the interwar period, industrial employers accelerated their intraurban deconcentration, as more efficient horizontal fabrication methods replaced older techniques requiring multistoried plants—thereby generating greater space needs that were too expensive to satisfy in the high-density central city. Newly suburbanizing manufacturers, however, continued their affiliation with intercity freight-rail corridors, because motor trucks were not yet able to operate with their present-day efficiencies and because the highway network of the outer ring remained inadequate until the 1950s.

The other major nonresidential activity of interwar suburbia was retailing. Clusters of automobile-oriented stores had first appeared in the urban fringes before World War I. By the early 1920s the roadside commercial strip had become a common sight in many southern California suburbs. Retail activities were also featured in dozens of planned automobile suburbs that sprang up after World War I—most notably in Kansas City's Country Club District, where the nation's first complete shopping center was opened in 1922. But these diversified retail centers spread slowly before the suburban highway improvements of the 1950s.



Unlike the two preceding eras, the postwar Freeway Era was not sparked by a revolution in urban transportation. Rather, it represented the coming of age of the now pervasive automobile culture, which coincided with the emergence of the U.S. from 15 years of economic depression and war. Suddenly

the automobile was no longer a luxury or a recreational diversion: overnight it had become a necessity for commuting, shopping, and socializing, essential to the successful realization of personal opportunities for a rapidly expanding majority of the metropolitan population. People snapped up cars as fast as the reviving peacetime automobile industry could roll them off the assembly lines, and a prodigious highway-building effort was launched, spearheaded by high speed, limited-access expressways. Given impetus by the 1956 Interstate Highway Act, these new freeways would soon reshape every corner of urban America, as the more distant suburbs they engendered represented nothing less than the turning inside-out of the historic metropolitan city.

The snowballing effect of these changes is expressed geographically in the sprawling metropolis of the postwar era. Most striking is the enormous band of growth that was added between 1945 and the 1980s, with freeway sectors pushing the metropolitan frontier deeply into the urban-rural fringe. By the late 1960s, the maturing expressway system began to underwrite a new suburban co-equality with the central city, because it was eliminating the metropolitan wide centrality advantage of the CBD. Now any location on the freeway network could easily be reached by motor vehicle, and intraurban accessibility had become a ubiquitous spatial good. Ironically, large cities had encouraged the construction of radial expressways in the 1950s and 1960s because they appeared to enable the downtown to remain accessible to the swiftly dispersing suburban population. However, as one economic activity after another discovered its new locational flexibility within the freeway metropolis, nonresidential deconcentration sharply accelerated in the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, as expressways expanded the radius of commuting to encompass the entire dispersed metropolis, residential location constraints relaxed as well. No longer were most urbanites required to live within a short distance of their job: the workplace had now become a locus of opportunity offering access to the best possible residence that an individual could afford anywhere in the urbanized area. Thus, the overall pattern of locally uniform, income-based clusters that had emerged in prewar automobile suburbia was greatly magnified in the Freeway Era, and such new social variables as age and lifestyle



produced an ever more balkanized population mosaic.

The revolutionary changes in movement and accessibility introduced during the four decades of the Freeway Era have resulted in nothing less than the complete geographic restructuring of the metropolis. The single-center urban structure of the past has been transformed into a polycentric metropolitan form in which several outlying activity concentrations rival the CBD. These new "suburban downtowns," consisting of vast orchestrations of retailing, office based business, and light industry, have become common features near the highway interchanges that now encircle every large central city. As these emerging metropolitan-level cores achieve economic and geographic parity with each other, as well as with the CBD of the nearby central city, they provide the totality of urban goods and services to their surrounding populations. Thus each metropolitan sector becomes a self sufficient functional entity, or realm/m. The application of this model to the Los Angeles region reveals six broad realms. Competition among several new suburban downtowns for dominance in the five outer realms is still occurring. In wealthy Orange County, for example, this rivalry is especially fierce, but Costa Mesa's burgeoning South Coast Metro is winning out as of early 1986.

The legacy of more than two centuries of intraurban transportation innovations, and the development patterns they helped stamp on the landscape of metropolitan America, is suburbanization—the growth of the edges of the urbanized area at a rate faster than in the already-developed interior. Since the geographic extent of the built-up urban areas has, throughout history, exhibited a remarkably constant radius of about 45 minutes of travel from the center, each breakthrough in higher-speed transport technology extended that radius into a new outer zone of suburban residential opportunity. In the nineteenth century, commuter railroads, horse-drawn trolleys, and electric streetcars each created their own suburbs—and thereby also created the large industrial city, which could not have been formed without incorporating these new suburbs into the pre-existing compact urban center. But the suburbs that materialized in the early twentieth century began to assert their independence from the central cities, which were ever more perceived as undesirable. As the automobile greatly reinforced

the dispersal trend of the metropolitan population, the distinction between central city and suburban ring grew as well. And as freeways eventually eliminated the friction effects of intrametropolitan distance for most urban functions, nonresidential activities deconcentrated to such an extent that by 1980 the emerging outer suburban city had become co-equal with the central city that spawned it.

As the transition to an information-dominated, postindustrial economy is completed, today's intraurban movement problems may be mitigated by the increasing substitution of communication for the physical movement of people. Thus, the city of the future is likely to be the "wired metropolis." Such a development would portend further deconcentration because activity centers would potentially be able to locate at any site offering access to global computer and satellite networks.

