

Paul Mies painting courtesy Superstock

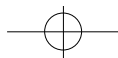
fat city

Understanding
American Urban Form
from a Transatlantic
Perspective

BY PIETRO S. NIVOLA

Urban settlements grow in three directions: up into high-rise buildings, in by crowding, or out into the suburbs. Although cities everywhere have developed in each of these ways at various times, nowhere in Europe has the outward dispersal of people and jobs matched the scope of suburbanization in the metropolitan areas of the United States. Here, less than a quarter of the nation's population

Pietro S. Nivola is a senior fellow in the Brookings Governmental Studies program. He is the author of Laws of Unintended Consequences: How Policies Shape the Cityscapes of Europe and America (Brookings, forthcoming).



lived in suburbia in 1950. Now more than 60 percent does. Why have most European cities remained compact compared with the sprawling American metropolis?



Photodisc

Thanks to light taxation of gasoline, the price of automotive fuel in the United States is almost a quarter of what it is in Italy. Is it surprising that Italians live closer to their urban centers, where they can more easily walk to

Misconceptions

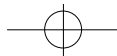
At first glance, the answer seems elementary. The urban centers of Europe are older, and the populations of their countries did not increase as rapidly in the postwar period. In addition, stringent national land use laws slowed suburban development, whereas the disjointed jurisdictions in U.S. metropolitan regions encouraged it.

But on closer inspection, this conventional wisdom does not suffice. The contours of most major urban areas in the United States were formed to a great extent by economic and demographic expansion after the Second World War. The same was true in much of Europe, where entire cities were reduced to rubble by the war and had to be rebuilt from the ground up. Consider Germany, the European country whose cities were carpet bombed. Many German cities today are old in name only, and though Germany's population as a whole grew much less quickly than America's after 1950, West German cities experienced formidable economic growth and in-migrations. Yet the metropolitan population density of the United States is still about one-fourth that of Germany. New York, our densest city, has approximately one-third the number of inhabitants per square mile of Frankfurt. Moreover, the dispersed U.S. pattern of development has continued apace even in places where population has increased little or not at all. From 1970 to 1990, the Chicago area's population rose

by only 4 percent, but the region's built-up land increased 46 percent. Metropolitan Cleveland's population actually declined by 8 percent, yet 33 percent more of the area's territory was developed.

Nor can our extreme degree of decentralization necessarily be imputed to the fragmented jurisdictional structure of U.S. metropolitan areas, wherein every suburban town or county presumably has autonomous control over the use of land. Actually, many urban regions in the United States are less fragmented than are those in much of Europe. Since 1950 about half of America's central cities have at least doubled their territory by annexing new suburbs. Houston covered 160 square miles in 1950. By 1980, exercising broad powers to annex its environs, it incorporated 556 square miles. In the same 30-year period, Jacksonville went from being a town of 30 square miles to a regional government enveloping 841 square miles—two-thirds the size of Rhode Island. True, the tri-state region of New York contains some 780 separate localities, some with zoning ordinances that permit only low-density subdivisions. But the urban region of Paris—Île de France—comprises 1,300 municipalities, all of which also have considerable discretion in the consignment of land for development.

The fact that central agencies in countries like France may exert influence on these local deci-



sions through national land use statutes is not an especially telling distinction either. Think of the relationship of U.S. state governments to their local communities as roughly analogous to that of Europe's unitary regimes to their respective local entities. Not only are the governments of some of our states behemoths (New York state's annual expenditures, for example, approximate Sweden's entire national budget), but also a significant number have enacted territorial planning legislation reminiscent of European guidelines. Indeed, from a legal standpoint, local governments in this country are mere "creatures" of the states, which can direct, modify, or even abolish their localities at will. Frequently, European municipalities, with their ancient independent charters, are less subordinated.

Different Strokes

The more interesting contrasts between the formative influences on urban spatial structures in America and Europe lie elsewhere. With three and a half million square miles of territory, the United States has had much more space over which to spread its settlements. And on this vast expanse, the diffusion of decentralizing technologies—motor vehicles, for example—commenced decades earlier than in other industrial countries. (In 1921, 1 in 12 Americans owned an automobile. Germany did not reach that ratio until 1960.) But besides such fundamentals, the public agendas here and in key European countries have been miles apart. The important distinctions, moreover, have less to do with differing "urban" programs and land use controls than with other national policies, the consequences of which are less understood.

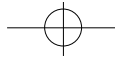
Lavish agricultural subsidies in Europe, for example, keep more farmers in business and help dissuade them from selling their land to developers. Thanks to light taxation of gasoline, the price of automotive fuel in the United States is almost a quarter of what it is in Italy. Is it surprising that Italians live closer to their urban centers, where they can more easily walk to work or rely on public transportation? (On a per capita basis, residents of Milan make an average of 350 trips a year on public transportation. People in, say, San Diego make an average of 17.) Gasoline is not the only form of energy that is much cheaper in the United States than in Europe. Electric power and furnace fuels are too. The expense of heating the equivalent of an average detached U.S. suburban home, and of operating the gigantic home appliances (such as refrigerators and freezers) that substitute for neighborhood stores in many American

residential communities, would be daunting to most households in large parts of Europe.

Systems of taxation make a profound difference. European tax structures bear down on consumption. Why don't most Dutch people and Danes vacate their tight towns and cities where many commuters prefer to ride bicycles, rather than sport-utility vehicles, to work? The sales tax on a new, medium-sized car in The Netherlands is approximately 9 times higher than in the United States; in Denmark, 37 times higher. The U.S. tax code, by contrast, favors spending over saving (the latter is effectively taxed twice) and then provides inducements to purchase particular goods—most notably houses, the mortgage interest on which is deductible. The effect of such provisions is to lead most American families into the suburbs, where spacious dwellings are available and absorb much of the nation's personal savings pool.

Suburban homeownership has been promoted in the United States by more than tax policy. Federal Housing Administration and Veterans Administration mortgage guarantees are estimated to have financed more than a quarter of all single-family homes built in the postwar period. Meanwhile, in Europe, the housing stocks of many countries were decimated by the war. Governments responded to the emergency by erecting apartment buildings and extending rental subsidies to large segments of the population. America also built a good deal of publicly subsidized rental housing in the postwar years, but chiefly to accommodate the most impoverished city-dwellers. Unlike the relatively mixed income housing complexes scattered around London or Paris, U.S. public housing projects further concentrated the urban poor in the inner cities, turning the likes of South Central Los Angeles or Chicago's South Side into pits of social degradation and violence. The effect was to accelerate the flight of urban middle-class families from the vicinity of these places to safer locations on the metropolitan fringe.

Few forces are more consequential for the shape of cities than are a society's investments in transportation infrastructure. Government at all levels in the United States has committed hundreds of billions to the construction and maintenance of highways, passenger railroads, and transit systems. What counts, however, is not just the magnitude of the commitment, but the *distribution* of the public expenditures among modes of transportation. Where, as in the United States, the share claimed by roads has dwarfed that of alter-



natives by almost 6 to 1, an unrelenting increase in automobile travel and a steady decline in transit usage, however heavily subsidized, was inevitable.

Dense cities dissipate without relatively intensive use of mass transit. In 1945 transit accounted for approximately 35 percent of urban passenger miles traveled in the United States. By 1994 the figure had dwindled to less than 3 percent—or roughly one-fifth the average in Western Europe. If early on, American transportation planners had followed the British or French budgetary practice of allocating between 40 and 60 percent of their transport outlays to passenger railroads and mass transit systems, instead of 73 percent for highways as in the U.S. case, there is little question that many U.S. cities would be more compressed today.

Dense cities also require a vibrant economy of neighborhood shops and services. (Why live in town if performing life's simplest everyday functions, like picking up fresh groceries for supper, requires driving to distant vendors?) But the local shopkeepers cannot compete with regional megastores proliferating in America's metropolitan shopping centers and strip malls. Multiple restrictions on the penetration and pricing practices of large retailers in various European countries protect small urban businesses. The costs to consumers are high, but the convenience and intimacy of London's "high streets" or of the corner markets in virtually every Parisian *arrondissement* are preserved.

For Richer or for Poorer?

To conclude that a wide range of public policies in Europe has helped curb suburban sprawl there is not to say, of course, that all those policies have enhanced the welfare of the Europeans—and hence, that the United States ought to emulate them. Most households are not better off when farmers are heavily subsidized, or when anticompetitive practices protect micro-businesses at the expense of larger, more efficient firms. Nor would most consumers gain greater satisfaction from housing strategies that assist renter occupancy but not homeownership, or from tax and transportation policies that force more people out of their cars and onto buses, trains, or bicycles. Arguably, the economies of some nations in Western Europe have faltered in recent years amid these sorts of public biases, while the United States has prospered in part because it has successfully resisted them.

Still, if we wonder why the cityscapes of America and Europe typically look so different, we

would do well to get beyond clichés (about underfunded U.S. urban programs, inadequate U.S. land use planning, or "balkanized" U.S. metropolitan governments) and to recognize the full breadth of hard policy choices that make for international differences. ■