

# Our Changing Cities

*Cities still have considerable vitality  
but they will require increasing attention  
if they are to be maintained*

*by Robert W. Oliver*

The results of the 1960 census of population should be extremely interesting. But, regardless of what the census tells us concerning the rate at which our various cities and metropolitan areas are growing, it will certainly confirm the proposition that the net population increase of the United States is taking place in cities somewhere. Less than a century ago, 60 percent of our labor force was employed on farms, but by 1950 the figure had declined to 10 percent, and it is continuing to decline. Our rural (as distinguished from our farm) population has declined from 95 percent of our total population in 1800 and 60 percent in 1900 to less than 40 percent at the present time.

Notwithstanding our pioneering traditions and our romantic recollections of the frontier, we have become a nation of city dwellers; more and more our culture reflects urban rather than rural living. And, increasingly, it reflects the way of life of large metropolitan areas — of the New York complex, for example, rather than Winesburg, Ohio. So, to know ourselves, we must know something about our cities and the ways in which they are changing. We must analyze the changing inter-relationships of urban people and urban things, for a city may be defined as *a concentration of people and the physical facilities they require in their enjoyment of life and their pursuit of income.*

Perhaps the most important manifestation of our changing cities is suburbanization — the movement of urban populations away from the centers of metropolitan areas.

In the United States there are 184 metropolitan areas — areas characterized by population concentrations around the older central cities which remain as the cores of the population concentrations. Between the censuses of 1940 and 1950, suburbs grew less rapidly than their central cities in only 25 metro-

politan areas; in over 60 percent of our expanding metropolitan areas, suburbs grew at a greater absolute as well as percentage rate. And the continuation of this trend will undoubtedly be demonstrated by the results of the 1960 census. We are not only urban dwellers; we are suburban dwellers as well.

Suburbanization is probably more pronounced in southern California than in any other section of the United States. As William H. Whyte, Jr., put the matter in *The Exploding Metropolis*:

On the fringe of the city, people are no longer drawn inward toward the center, but outward to the new shopping centers. Los Angeles, which has sometimes been called 100 suburbs in search of a city, shows the pattern at its most extreme; there is hardly any center at all, and what center there is seems useful to most citizens chiefly as a way to get from one freeway to another.

Attempts are being made to provide Los Angeles with a center: Near the Los Angeles City Hall a new, impressive public building appears every year or so; we shall soon have a downtown opera house as well as a stadium for the Dodgers; and the redevelopment of Bunker Hill is underway. But the outward population movement in southern California will continue.

Between 1930 and 1940 the population of Los Angeles County increased most rapidly in such areas as Vernon, Maywood, Bell, Huntington Park, Santa Monica, Burbank, and Glendale. Between 1940 and 1950 Long Beach, Inglewood, Encino, and Compton were added to the list. And since 1950 the impressive growth has been in such places as Whittier, Azusa, Covina, Glendora, San Fernando, Puente Hills, and Palos Verdes. If present trends continue, during the next decade the greatest absolute and percentage population increases in the Los Angeles metropolitan area will occur in the outlying sections of Los Angeles

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County and in the surrounding counties of Ventura, San Bernardino, Riverside, and Orange. Indeed, it is predicted that by the year 1980 there will be one giant (should I say "monstrous"?) city — a megapolis — stretching from Santa Barbara to San Diego.

### *The impact of the automobile*

The pattern of suburban growth has been due in large measure to the availability, farther and farther away from downtown business centers, of undeveloped, low-cost land. This has attracted manufacturing enterprises as well as residential developments, and the outward movements of business and population have reinforced each other.

It is clear that the extensive development of suburbs would have been impossible without the automobile. Together with our network of highways, the automobile has made it possible for people to live in the "country" and work in the city. And it has done a great deal more.

In the case of many of those metropolitan areas which, like Los Angeles, have developed largely since the advent of the automobile, the pattern of suburban growth has rendered public transportation unprofitable. Instead of being spread out along major rail or bus lines, population now tends to increase more or less evenly in ever-increasing concentric circles, with insufficient density in most places to support any but the most casual of public transportation systems. Thus, the automobile perpetuates itself by rendering competition obsolete.

The automobile has also had an enormous impact upon shopping habits and, consequently, shopping facilities. Successful new shopping centers are those which offer a complete selection of merchandise and are surrounded by large, readily-accessible parking lots. This means that the older shopping areas, which developed in long, thin strips along fashionable boulevards, are becoming obsolete. Certainly, if they are located near the centers of metropolitan areas, they must entice their customers through (as Victor Gruen has expressed it in *A Greater Fort Worth Tomorrow*) "a series of obstacles which each day become more and more discouraging — traffic, parking, noise, fumes . . . and (they) must consistently maintain high sales per square foot" to pay the rent the landlords must receive to justify the prices they paid for the real estate.

### *Changing economic functions*

The growing obsolescence of many downtown shopping areas is but one manifestation of the changing functions of central cities. In general, just as the population of central cities is declining relative to the population of metropolitan areas, so is employment. But the relative decline in employment is uneven. The relative decline in manufacturing and retail trade

has been greater than that in business services, finance, insurance and real estate. In other words, central downtown areas are maintaining their pre-eminence in those activities for which office space is a prerequisite, even though manufacturing and retail trade are moving to the suburbs. But the business and professional people who inhabit these downtown offices by day must travel farther and farther to the suburban homes they occupy at night.

### *Changing qualities of residential areas*

People must also travel through what has been called a "gray belt" of older residential areas, where middle class housing is becoming lower class housing, and where slums exist or may be developing. In the case of most downtown business areas, the profit motive induces the upkeep, even the renovation for new uses, of business property. But the profit motive, the mainspring of the market system, is not so powerful a force in inducing the updating and upgrading of residential property.

According to the Welfare Planning Council of Los Angeles:

There seems to be a specific time when a community begins to age and change its character. A family buys a home when the children are small. After twenty or twenty-five years the children have left home and frequently the house is sold. When a whole subdivision has been constructed and houses sold almost simultaneously, the transition period at the end of a generation can be fast and marked. At the end of two generations, a neighborhood may deteriorate into a blighted area.

This is particularly true in southern California, for many of our smaller, older homes are of cheap and unsightly frame construction, uncompetitive with the homes of more modern design and equipment. And in southern California, the outward movement to undeveloped, low-cost land has been particularly easy.

An older residential area need not become a slum area. A city will have a slum problem only if its buildings continue indefinitely to be neglected. It is certainly possible that the strict enforcement of health, sanitation, and building codes and zoning ordinances may prevent the development of slums. But old age and obsolescence tend to be synonymous, particularly when the rate of technological change is high. Furthermore, as property values decline, at least relatively, obsolete residential areas become attractive to lower income families and individuals. If these people are not accustomed to maintaining and improving property, the deterioration of the area will be accelerated and slum conditions may follow.

Thus, while middle and upper income families are

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establishing suburban residence farther and farther away from downtown business centers, and while most downtown business centers are being remodeled to meet the changing demands of the market, many of the older residential areas in between are becoming older and more obsolete. This is a problem which is attracting increasing attention all over the country. It is the problem which Congress had in mind when it passed the Housing Act of 1949.

### *The rationale of urban redevelopment*

The federal government was interested in slum clearance during the 1930's. But by the end of World War II it was recognized that the problems of urban obsolescence were much broader than slum clearance. In 1949 Senator Robert A. Taft, along with Senators Ellender and Wagner, introduced legislation which allowed the federal government to participate actively in urban redevelopment by helping to finance local redevelopment programs.

Redevelopment planning is a strictly local matter, but federal financial assistance may be forthcoming once it has been demonstrated that redevelopment is needed, and that the spread of blight may be arrested by the redevelopment program.

The heart of federal redevelopment legislation is the provision that the federal government will pay two-thirds of the difference between the cost of acquiring and clearing the land and the amount the land can be sold for after it is cleared. The local community must pay the other one-third, though it is assumed that this cost will be more than recovered subsequently as a consequence of increased tax revenues.

The rationale of the federal redevelopment program can be summarized in three propositions:

- 1) The social costs of crime, disease, juvenile delinquency, illiteracy, and unsightliness can be reduced if obsolete residential areas are redeveloped before they become slums.

- 2) Redevelopment will seldom take place if it is left to strictly private action. An individual property owner may be wasting his money if he improves his own property while the area as a whole remains unimproved. Even a group of public-spirited citizens may be ineffective if it cannot acquire property through the power of eminent domain.

- 3) Federal financial assistance is needed because municipalities lack the taxing power to raise the revenue required for adequate redevelopment, and because the social gains of redevelopment on a national basis will benefit all Americans.

Actually expenditures designed to induce our middle income families to continue to live in the hearts of our cities are just as desirable as freeway and public utility expenditures (and real estate campaigns)

designed to attract people farther and farther into the hinterland.

### *A return to the city*

In any event, those who are fond of cities, and the activities which can only be supported by large concentrations of people, are anxious to see that our downtown areas are useful not only for business but also for recreation. The case has been put most graphically by William H. Whyte, Jr., in *The Exploding Metropolis*, in explaining why people who have lived in the suburbs may want to return to the city:

Do-it-yourself no longer amuses, and all the little things that once seemed so therapeutic — weeding the driveway, pruning the roses, trimming the hedge — are now a monstrous nuisance. The grass, particularly, seems to become a Thing, and it is sometimes mentioned with such animosity as to suggest that the suburban lawn may be the salvation of the city.

For the wife, the social life of suburbia can begin to pall; earlier, when there were children's problems and P.T.A. to talk about, she may have been close to people with whom she really had very little in common. Now, with the children gone, she isn't so close, and as her work load has eased up, she is drawn increasingly to the city. Often she has identified it with a certain freedom: the day in town has been a day off (as some wives put it, the "maid's day off") and she has long envied her husband his presumably exciting life in the city. Now she too wants to be close to things, and while she will be sorry, perhaps, to leave the garden, she looks forward to the museums and the theaters and symphonies.

In short, for many people, downtown city living has great appeal. Thus, people can be induced back to the city if the city has good museums and theaters and symphonies (and shops, restaurants, and night-clubs), and if these people are not repelled by widespread blight.

There is some evidence that the city is more conducive than the suburb to really splendid living. In the heart of Manhattan builders are now planning or erecting 140 apartment buildings, almost all of which will bring monthly rents in excess of \$50 a room. In downtown Chicago work is under way on two luxurious 60-story circular "living towers." In downtown Boston 78 new \$300-to-\$675-a-month apartments will be completed this year. And this pattern is being repeated elsewhere in the country.

There is no doubt that our cities still have considerable vitality, but they will require increasing attention if they are to be maintained. When the United States was in its infancy, it was the practice of our farmers to move on to new land when the old land had been "used up." It is questionable, however, that we can afford a similar extensive approach in planning for the future of our changing cities.