TOWARDS A MORE HUMANE METROPOLIS:
People And Nature In The 21st Century City

By Rutherford H. Platt  
Professor of Geography and Director, Ecological Cities Project  
University of Massachusetts, Amherst  
(platt@geo.umass.edu)

It is indeed an honor and a privilege to take part in this celebration of Ed Blakely’s work and the launching of this new Center in his name. I thank all concerned for inviting me to be here today.

I first met Ed Blakely a few months after the Oakland Hills Fire of October 20, 1991 which burned some 3,300 homes in about nine hours. Twenty five people were killed in that disaster, and thousands lost their homes along with treasured possessions. My reason for coming to Oakland was to study the disaster recovery process and the role of federal disaster policies in that process (Platt, 1999, Ch. 8). As special assistant to the Mayor in coordinating the recovery, Ed helped to ensure that the disaster was carefully studied and all feasible measures taken to prevent it from happening again. I am sure he could give plenty of inside information as to the intense political infighting among stakeholders that shaped the outcome that is visible today.

My next contact with him was through his 1997 book with Mary Gail Snyder: Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States (1997). Their study, which was supported and published by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, provided the first comprehensive critique of the phenomenon of gated communities, that have become so commonplace in upscale California and throughout affluent America. As of 1997, they estimated that the country already had about 20,000 gated communities with more than 3 million units. In many of our upscale metropolitan suburbs, virtually all new homes seem to be built behind walls, gates, and guardhouses.

Fortress America raised troubling questions about the implications of privatization of so many traditionally public elements of urban life such as streets, transportation, neighborhoods, schools, recreation, retail districts. Even the highways are now choked with mobile fortresses called SUVs. Paul Goldberger (2000, viii), architectural critic of The New Yorker, has referred to this trend as “The triumph of the private realm.”

This line of thinking inevitably leads to consideration of another eminent urbanist whose philosophy represented the antithesis of “gatedness,” namely William H. Whyte, known to one and all as Holly Whyte. I first encountered Holly Whyte through his classic 1956 study of post-war suburbia: The Organization Man which made me vow never to be an “organization man” and not to live in a suburb. His 1968 book The Last Landscape was the bible for the fermenting land conservation movement, in which I played a small role as a newly appointed attorney with the Open Lands Project in Chicago. During the 1970s and 80s, Whyte studied the interaction of people in the streets, parks, and plazas of New York and other cities, leading to the book and film entitled The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces (1981) and his capstone book: City: Rediscovering the Center (1988). These books collectively taught a generation of urban designers to view cities as habitats for people, rather than simply as economic machines, transportation nodes, or grandiose architectural stage sets.

As the United States approaches 300 million residents, of whom four-fifths live in cities or suburbs, Holly Whyte’s vision of people-centered urban communities has never been more needed as an antidote to the tyranny of privatism documented by Blakely and Snyder. Whyte anticipated much of today’s Smart Growth Movement by about three decades. Supported by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, he roamed the

---

country documenting and promoting concepts like cluster development, conservation easements, planned unit development, use-value assessments for productive farmland, walkable and mixed use neighborhoods, vibrant streets and parks, and higher densities than conventional planning wisdom advised.

But unlike Smart Growth advocates, Whyte did not confine himself to the marketplace of new construction and infill development. He thought about cities holistically and sought to understand what makes them habitable and humane. In a sense, his writings articulate an “Urban Ethic” comparable in simplicity and universality to Aldo Leopold’s (1949/1966) famous “Land Ethic”: A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

In Paul Goldberger’s (2000, vii) words:

[Whyte’s] objective research on the city, on open space, on the way people use it, was set within what I think I must call a moral context. Holly believed with deep passion that there was such a thing as quality of life, and the way we build cities, the way we make places, can have a profound effect on what lives are lived within those places.

Holly Whyte died in 1999, and two years later, I wrote a proposal to the Lincoln Institute to hold a symposium in New York City to celebrate and continue his work. The grant was awarded and augmented by a gift from Laurance Rockefeller, who had long been Holly’s friend and supporter of his work on cities and land use. The magic of Holly Whyte’s name in New York opened doors all over the city and among my first recruits as a speaker and advisor was, of course, Edward Blakely, now located at the New School University across Washington Square from the symposium venue at the NYU Law School.

We called the symposium and the book that will ensue from it: “The Humane Metropolis” by which we mean cities and suburbs that are more green, more people-friendly, and more socially equitable. We planned the program: to celebrate and continue the work of William H. Whyte. The “celebration” was provided through tributes from close friends, associates, and Holly’s daughter, Alexandra Whyte. “Continuing Whyte’s work” was addressed by invited practitioners and scholars from across the country who are involved with envisioning and creating more humane cities and metropolitan regions today.

**Early Warning: Whyte and “Urban Sprawl”**

Holly Whyte apparently invented the term “urban sprawl” ---the title of his essay that appeared in a subversive little book *The Exploding Metropolis* in 1957. This essay and another by Jane Jacobs in the same volume launched both their careers as urban analysts and instigated a national dialogue about postwar suburban growth. His concern about “urban sprawl” was aroused by his anguish at the rapid, poorly planned suburbanization of his beloved home region, the Brandywine Valley and Chester County, in eastern Pennsylvania during the 1950s.

*The Exploding Metropolis* challenged postwar development in both suburbs and cities as designed by “people who don’t like cities.” This challenge was primarily concerned with the physical form and appearance of urban places, aesthetically and functionally. Concern with the outward appearance of urban places of course did not begin and or end with Holly Whyte. Predecessors included Lewis Mumford, Benton MacKay, and the City Beautiful Movement of the earlier 20th Century. More recent critics of the urban landscape have included Peter Blake, Donald Appleyard, Kevin Lynch, J. B. Jackson, Grady Clay, Tony Hiss, and James Howard Kunstler. But few have articulated the nexus between urban form and function in simpler, more direct terms than Whyte.

It must be noted, however, that *The Exploding Metropolis*, and indeed the conservation movement of the 1960s, was totally flawed in one important respect, namely in addressing what is now termed “social justice”—the preferential treatment of the white middle class over nonwhite poor in federal housing and tax policies, building new highways through lower income communities, as well as the use of exclusionary zoning by suburban communities.
But despite its complacency on class and race, *The Exploding Metropolis* was indeed revolutionary for its day in at least four respects: First, it rejected the conventional wisdom that suburbs are necessarily preferable to “real cities.” Second, it urged that cities should be thought of as habitats for people, not simply as centers of economic production and grandiose architectural settings. Third, it challenged the prevailing notion that population density (“crowding”) is necessarily bad. Fourth, it established a precedent for more searching critiques of urban policies and programs in the coming decades. In short, *The Exploding Metropolis* launched a national debate over the nature, purpose, and design of city space which continues today, as now expanded to entire metropolitan regions.

**Metropolitan Growth Since *The Exploding Metropolis***

Despite the early warnings of *The Exploding Metropolis* and its progeny, efforts to control urban sprawl in the United States have largely failed. Since 1950, metropolitan areas designated by the Bureau of the Census have increased in number from 169 to about 340, in population from 84 million to 226 million, and in size from 9% to about 18% of the nation’s land area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Metropolitan America: 1950 and 2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U. S. Population</td>
<td>152 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Metropolitan Areas</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metro Population</td>
<td>84 million (55% of U.S.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Metro Areas &gt;1 Mill.</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop. of Metro Areas &gt;1 Mill.</td>
<td>45 mill. (30% of U.S.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metro % of U. S. Land Area</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aver. Metro Pop. Density</td>
<td>407 persons/sq. mile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central City Population</td>
<td>49 mill. (32% of U.S.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban Population</td>
<td>35 mill. (23% of U.S.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Suburbs have grown from 35 million residents in 1950 to over 141 million in 2000, and now are home to slightly more than one-half of the U.S. population. Metropolitan areas as a whole (including central cities) today account for four-fifths of the nation’s population. By comparison, in 1960 central cities, suburbs, and nonmetro areas each represented about one-third of the nation’s population. [Insert pie graphs of pop. change 1960-80-00]

Concerning race and ethnicity, 40 percent of central city residents were classified as nonwhite in the 2000 Census while suburbs were 19 percent nonwhite. For older central cities, white flight has continued through the 1990s. According to Bruce Katz (2001) of the Brookings Institution, the top 100 cities in the U.S. changed from being 52 percent white in 1990 to 44 percent in 2000, reflecting the net migration of 2.3 million whites to the suburbs and elsewhere.

Of course, the “burbs” today bear little resemblance to the “Ozzie and Harriet” era of suburban growth in the 1950s. (As Carl Anthony (2002) has written: “The world of Ozzie and Harriet was flat. If you ventured too far out, you’d fall off the edge.”) The old commuter-Dad and stay-at-home-Mom (both white middle class) have been displaced by harried one and two working-parent households (for those who still have jobs). According to Karen Kornbluh in *The Atlantic Monthly* (2003, p. 111), more than 70 percent of families with children today have either two working parents or a single working parent. Those working parents are far more likely to commute by highway from suburb to suburb—slowly, expensively, and stressfully—than to commute downtown by public transportation.
Suburbs have far outpaced traditional downtowns in creation of new office space and jobs. As early as 1991, Joel Garreau (p. 63) observed that South Coast Plaza in Orange County had more retail business daily than all of downtown San Francisco. In the case of Atlanta, sociologist Robert D. Bullard notes that the central city’s share of the metropolitan job market dropped from 40% in 1980 to 19% in 1997. From 1990 to 1997, the central city gained only 4,503 new jobs, just 1.3% of all jobs created in the region during that period while 295,000 jobs or 78% of all jobs were added to Atlanta’s northern suburbs, out of reach of most of the region’s poor whites and people of color (Bullard and others, 2000, pp. 10-11).

The old rich-poor divide between cities and suburbs now plays out among suburbs as well. David Brooks’s pre-Enron bestseller *Bobos in Paradise* (2000) observes that upscale suburbs today—ranging from old mainline towns to new Edge Cities—rival or displace large city downtowns in choices of cuisine, merchandise, culture, and entertainment (aside from the choice to walk to any of those). Meanwhile, The Brookings Institution reports that during the 1990s, cities and suburbs in certain regions are reversing roles in terms of household composition: “Cities in high-immigration [Sunbelt] metros are becoming more ‘suburban’ in their household composition, while suburbs in slow-growing Northern metros are becoming more ‘urban’ in theirs.” (Frey and Berube, 2002). Concomitantly, many older suburbs in the North and Midwest mimic their central cities in terms of poverty, housing quality and affordability, joblessness, schools, health care, and environmental degradation.

Towards Ecological Cities

Metropolitan America is increasingly difficult to escape from, especially for the populations of the nation’s East and West Coast “Megalopolis.” (Gottmann, 1961). Beginning in the 1950s, the five-day work week, rising incomes, affordable cars, and limited-access highways helped the white middle class to join the elite in journeying to “the country,” defined as somewhere maritime or bucolic beyond the urban fringe. The 1961 Report of the Presidential Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission, in which Holly Whyte served as a consultant, identified the favorite form of outdoor recreation (for the white middle class at least) to be “driving for pleasure.” But as the prescient Lewis Mumford observed, also in 1961: “The ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible.” (Mumford, 1961, p. 486).

Now the urban fringe has receded indefinitely in travel time and distance. Traditional holiday meccas like Cape Cod, the Maryland Eastern Shore, the Outer Banks of North Carolina, or the Sierra foothills increasingly resemble what people are trying to escape from – the same congestion, billboards, shopping malls, and general roadside schlock—“The Exploding Metropolis” writ large. Traffic getting to and from them is increasingly unbearable and meanwhile, the less fortunate, the unemployed, the infirm, the elderly are sentenced to live and die in the metropolitan environment, come what may.

It would seem therefore that “urban sprawl” has become a moot issue, a quaint vestige of the era when urban intellectuals scoffed at the boring “burbs.” Holly Whyte’s worst fears have been fulfilled: farmlands are covered with subdivisions and people migrate between gated community, private Edge Cities, and private health clubs, rarely encountering either nature or people different from themselves. Aside from the occasional longer trip to somewhere still quaint, picturesque, or “natural” for those who have the time and money, metropolitan residents (middle class and poor alike) live in a largely artificial habitat, with their only contact with the natural world through television documentaries about the Gallapagos, the Great Barrier Reef, the vanishing rainforest, and Antarctica. Many respected ecologists have in fact fostered the idea that nature is only to be found in such remote, exotic, and nonurban locations, accessible only to scientists and the rich and leisureed.

There is however a contrarian view, rapidly gaining momentum, that “urban ecology” is not an oxymoron. An increasing literature is documenting the functions and services of ecological processes within urban areas, such as soil formation, carbon sequestration, habitat for biotic diversity, flood reduction, water supply filtration, microclimate moderation (Baskin, 1997; Daily, G. C., ed. 1997). Fragments of nature in cities may also yield aesthetic joy, as in discovering a wildflower springing from a crack in a parking lot, a
peculiar insect, an ancient tree outlined against the sky at dusk, or a Great White Heron standing on its patch of urban wetland. More ecological cities are also likely to be safer from flooding. Our project is documenting experience around the country in managing urban watersheds to alleviate flood hazards while protecting or restoring wetlands, riparian stream banks, and coastal estuaries.

There is a growing recognition that metropolitan regions contain myriad scraps and remnants of earlier landscapes worth saving or renurturing. Long neglected urban streams and watersheds are the focus of “greenway” programs and water quality improvements; urban riparian corridors, floodplains, and wetlands are being protected and in some cases restored. Similarly there are older parks and conservation areas, legacies of past good intentions, that merit revisioning, redesign, and reuse. Central Park, Bryant Park, and Prospect Park are leading examples in New York City; many others are found in cities around the country. (Harnik, 2000)

Southern California, despite or perhaps because of its rapid growth, provides many examples of creative regreening. For instance, a group named ARTScorpsLA, under the guidance of artist Tricia Ward, has created a beautiful neighborhood eco-park in Los Angeles called La Coulebra, turning discarded concrete rubble into art forms decorated by neighborhood children. Habitat Conservation Plans under the Endangered Species Act have been applied (with mixed success) to mitigating the loss of habitat in the Coachella Valley and elsewhere. At Coal Canyon, not far from Riverside, a freeway underpass is being unpaved and replaced with native vegetation as a corridor for hikers and mountain lions—(may they peacefully coexist!). In San Diego, I had the privilege of meeting Meyer and Helen Harrison, both artists by training, who have pioneered a blending of ecology, art, and landscape design in projects scattered across the U.S. and Europe. Other panelists will no doubt provide many more examples.

Elsewhere, the City of Chicago has launched a $30 million project to revitalize the “mother of all brownfields” at Lake Calumet on the city’s South Side. Of the 5,000-acre planning area, 1,000 acres of largely former manufacturing sites have been set aside for industrial redevelopment to be funded partly through Tax Increment Financing. The remaining 4,000 acres will be used largely as green space, habitat, and restored wetlands. The project involves representation from the low and moderate income communities that abut the site. (Incidentally, Chicago’s City Hall is now capped by an experimental “green roof.”)

The federal government, environmental organizations, and major research institutions are collaborating in diverse ways to measure and enhance the health of urban ecosystems. A few examples of such programs include:

- **Urban Long Term Ecological Research Programs** (LTERs) in Baltimore and Phoenix funded by the National Science Foundation (www.beslter.org and www.caplter.asu.edu);
- **CityGreen**, a program of American Forests applies satellite imagery to measure change in urban tree canopy (www.americanforests.org);
- **Green Infrastructure** – a joint program of The U.S. Forest Service and The Conservation Fund (http://www.greeninfrastructure.net);
- **Earthworks** – a program of The National Park Service;
- **Green Cities Program** of the Trust for Public Land is documenting new forms and uses of city parks (Harnik., 2000; www.tpl.org);
- **Center for Urban Ecological Restoration** (CURE)—a joint project of Rutgers and the Brooklyn Botanic Garden— is conducting research on ecological replanting of landfills in New York City (www.i-cure.org);
- **Urban Resources Initiative** – Partnership of Yale School of the Environment and City of New Haven (www.yale.edu/uri)
Urban Environmental Education Centers are being established by the National Audubon Society in Prospect Park in Brooklyn and Debs Park in Los Angeles in partnership with local public and private interests;

Sustainable Cities Program – University of Southern California (www.usc.edu/dept/geography/ESPE;

Ecological Cities Project – University of Massachusetts, Amherst (www.ecologicalcities.org)

Old industrial cities like Philadelphia, Detroit, and Baltimore have vast empty spaces, vacant lots, and derelict buildings, once sites for housing and manufacturing, that have been abandoned and often cleared. Some of these are now being put to use by local residents as community gardens, miniature nature preserves, affordable housing (e.g. HOPE VI projects) or simply used as informal recreational space. One example is the New Haven Urban Resources Initiative, under the joint management of the Yale School of the Environment and the City of New Haven. The New York Horticultural Society is sponsoring a program of urban gardening at branch public libraries, using former prison inmates whom they have trained in gardening skills. Also in New York City, community gardens on city-owned land have been threatened by plans for affordable housing. Hopefully, Mayor Bloomberg and his Director of Planning, Amanda Burden – a Holly Whyte protege—will work out a compromise plan to accommodate both gardens and housing.

Urban regreening projects, which are being documented by the Ecological Cities Project (my program based at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst) are not just about nature and ecological process. They are also serve to bring people together. Andrew Light, an environmental ethicist at New York University calls for “a sense of environmental citizenship . . [to be achieved through] a direct participatory relationship between local human communities and the nature they inhabit or are adjacent to.” (Light, 2001, p. 28). And in programs like the New Haven Urban Resources Initiative and L.A.’s La Coulebra, the social benefits also cross divisions of age, class, and race—the seeds of a more truly humane metropolis in which people of all backgrounds join in protecting and restoring remnants of urban nature, and in so doing rediscover each other as well.

REFERENCES


Gottman, J. *Megalopolis: The Urbanized Northeastern Seaboard of the United States.*


