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The Political History of a Postwar Suburban Society Revisited

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Abstract

There is a vast multidisciplinary literature on U.S. suburbs. Through an urban historical lens, this article charts the public policies that gave way to the rise of a suburban society. It explores the evolution of scholarly historical thought on the roles that political processes and public policies played in the development of the suburban landscape. Major political and social movements, including the areas of housing, transportation, and race relations, are surveyed. The future prospects for metropolitan America suggest that politics and policy contributed to complex social, economic, and political realities that confront suburbs in an era of uncontrolled urban sprawl and mounting suburban decline.

Introduction

Suburbia conjures up many iconic images of the so-called 'American Dream'. From the classic 1950s television show *Leave It to Beaver* to today's risqué, smash-hit show *Desperate Housewives*, suburbs have been idealized in popular American culture. These suburban images depict a spacious house on a tree-lined street where white, middle-class Americans had a place to call home after World War II. The idealized suburb has also been examined in Eric Avila's recent book *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*.[1] Avila shows how cultural images of Disneyland, Hollywood, and even Dodger Stadium have invoked classic images of suburbia and enforced class and race hierarchies – and ultimately suburban political preferences. Indeed, the pursuit of happiness in postwar history has been completely synonymous with the suburbs. A move to the suburbs symbolized many things in the American context. It was a move of social and economic mobility – a path that led away from the nation's ailing central cities and to the emergent suburban frontier. The so-called American Dream was realized in the nation's nascent suburbs.[2]

Yet the suburbs did not happen by accident, and they all were not rosy, optimistic places. The suburban frontier was the product of a deliberate effort on behalf of the federal government to alter the pattern of development in the U.S. and shape private preferences in the marketplace. The

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result was not only the creation of a suburban nation, but also the evolution of a large heterogeneous suburban landscape. This article reviews the evolution of scholarly historical thought on the roles that political processes and public policies played in the development of the suburban landscape. In the first section, I present an overview of the political history of postwar suburbanization, and then in the second section, I critically interpret recent scholarship on U.S. suburbs through a historiography of postwar suburban literature. First, the history of the federal government's involvement in promoting suburbanization and key public policies areas of housing and transportation are analyzed. Then, a survey of an emerging body of scholarship offers a revisionist history of suburbs, focusing on competing perspectives on the historical patterns of suburbanization, including the push-pull model, the metropolitan political framework, and the race-space intersection. Last, I offer a reflection on the future prospects for suburbs and the implications for the study of their past, present, and future.

Revisiting the Political History of Suburbia

To reflect on the political history of U.S. suburbs requires an examination of the role that public policy played in forming and shaping the suburban landscape. As early as the 1950s, critiques and negative social commentary about public policy and the suburbs were abundant. For instance, early historical accounts compared life in the suburbs to the central city. Social critics like Lewis Mumford and William Whyte criticized the suburbs as banal and as places of conformity. For instance, in his book, *The Organization Man*, Whyte argued that suburbia was plagued with 'classlessness'.[3] In other words, the suburbs housed a population that was comprised of one uniform socioeconomic group – they lacked diversity. Likewise, in 1961, Lewis Mumford offered a scathing indictment of the suburban environment as a place of

> uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibility at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group . . . conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold.[4]

Other early critics echoed similar critiques of suburbs. In her timeless book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs offered an even harsher indictment of the suburbs, arguing that suburbs were 'thin dispersions [that] lack any regrettable degree of innate vitality, staying power, or inherent usefulness as settlements'.[5] Even though these critics viewed the suburbs as a negative force in 1950s American society, neither suburban growth nor its ancillary public policies dissipated. The outflow of people and jobs from central cities to suburbs suggests that this pattern was a 'staying power'. It remained politically and culturally popular through the end of the twentieth century despite various social critiques.

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As the suburban society fully amalgamated metropolitan America in the second half of the twentieth century, studies and critiques of suburbs shifted focus. While earlier studies in 1950s and 1960s concentrated on the social and cultural aspects of suburbia, subsequent scholarship during the 1970s and 1980s began to critically analyze the role that public policy played historically in building a suburban society. Scholars of this generation, including Kenneth Jackson and Mark Gelfand, argued that suburbia benefited from an array of public policies that helped cement a large, middle-class society located just outside central cities.[6] These scholars argued that the new landscape would not have come to fruition without a concerted and deliberate public policy campaign. As the former hinterlands of the city, suburbia required houses for its new population and roads to travel throughout the region. So urban historians in this era put forth that two major policy areas, then, had especially important consequences for the development of suburbs. First, they held that federal transportation legislation in the wake of World War II spurred the construction of a massive road network that paved the way to suburbia. Second, they argued that a package of federal housing policies provided the means to build scores of new housing units and ultimately stimulated the market for the private development of suburbia for decades to come. In short, urban scholars during the 1970s and 1980s primarily took a federal view of the history of suburbs, holding that public policy played a role in shaping the transformation of the metropolitan fringe from bucolic suburbs to urbanized suburbs.

TRANSPORTATION POLICY

The construction of a massive network of highways and roadways throughout the nation's metropolitan areas aided the growth of suburbs. In 1956, the 84th U.S. Congress passed the Federal-Aid Highway Act to plan and construct a 41,000-mile interstate highway system. Popularly known as the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act, President Eisenhower's original public policy goal was to provide a transportation network that would allow for the quick and easy mobilization of U.S. military troops and supplies in the event of a national emergency. As Congress began to debate the legislation, Eisenhower's policy rationale quickly became symbolic as private, corporate interests quickly realized the potential economic impact of such a large-scale public works project.[7] The nation's three largest automakers, Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler, successfully lobbied Congress for the passage of the transportation legislation. This lobbying coincided with the automakers' peak production during the twentieth century. The dramatic increases in the number of automobiles nationally provide evidence of the industry's success. In the three decades after World War II, the number of automobiles *quadrupled* from 25 million to 106 million cars in 1975. Then, in the three subsequent decades, the

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number of automobiles *doubled*, reaching 210 million cars in 2005. This was not the only instance when automotive companies promoted the construction of roadways. Prior to the expansive highway projects of the 1950s, the automotive industry helped to accelerate the decline of streetcars and trolleys in urban centers. When governments across the country decided that mass transit should be financially self-sufficient, user fees were implemented to cover the costs of ridership. Declining passengers led to increased financial insecurity as automobiles became the preferred mode of transportation. For example, General Motors was found to be guilty of criminal conspiracy when it replaced the streetcar operations in big cities like Los Angeles, St. Louis, Philadelphia, and Baltimore with their own company's manufactured buses.[8] In short, the government's transportation policies, along with its tacit endorsement of the nation's major automotive industrial corporations, cemented the roads that led to the new houses of suburbia. This public infrastructure was critical for the growth of suburbs nationally.

HOUSING POLICY

Urban historians Kenneth Jackson and Mark Gelfand assert that the role that twentieth-century federal housing policy played in the development of suburbs cannot be understated. At the brink of the twenty-first century, the housing sector collectively represented approximately $2 trillion or one-fifth of the nation's $9 trillion-plus gross national product.[9] Since 1950, furthermore, the housing sector consistently represented just under a quarter of the gross domestic product.[10] The postwar economic impact of housing on the U.S. economy has been colossal to say the least. Federal housing policies on subsidies such as the mortgage-interest deduction, deduction of property tax payments, and low-interest mortgages for first-time homebuyers contributed to this economic strength. These policies created undeniable incentives for urban residents to purchase a new house and join the ranks of the two-thirds of Americans who are now homeowners. Moreover, the homebuilders like the Levitt Brothers capitalized on the availability of cheap land on the metropolitan fringe and took advantage of low-interest government loans in housing to construct and mass-produce houses for the first generation of suburbanites. Last, discriminatory housing policy encouraged the private real-estate practices of redlining and blockbusting to ensure the growth of a racially homogenous suburban landscape. Altogether, these policies can be attributed to the government's long-term role in the housing sector, and scholars have recognized the overall impact of this involvement as synonymous with the process of suburbanization.

Levitt and Sons, the nation's preeminent homebuilder during the late 1940s and 1950s, played an early, yet pivotal, role in building suburbia. They were one of the first entrepreneurs to capitalize on the soaring

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demand for housing in the years following World War II. Postwar urban America was overcrowded with returning war veterans anxious to start new families. Cities were bursting at their seams, and many observers of urban America were calling for change. Whereas others viewed these conditions as the new urban dilemma, the Levitts, as astute businessmen, saw an opportunity. Abraham Levitt and his two sons, Alfred and William, helped build the way to suburbia through the development of various new suburban towns along the East Coast. Aptly named 'Levittown', the first community was built on Long Island, New York on a former 1,200-acre potato farm. Demand for new houses in Levittown was enormous. In 1947, the Levitts initially built 2,000 rental homes, and within days, every unit was rented to a veteran and his family. And so, the Levitts announced the construction of an additional 4,000 housing units for sale. By the end of the twentieth century's midpoint, Levitt and Sons had constructed 17,447 houses in their new suburban town. Similar Levittowns were later built in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Puerto Rico.[11]

In 1950, in their cover article on the Levitts, *Time* noted that,

> The houses in Levittown, which sell for a uniform price of $7,990, cannot be mistaken for castles. Each has a sharp-angled roof and a picture window, radiant heating in the floor, 12-by-16 ft. living room, bath, kitchen, two bedrooms on the first floor, and an 'expansion attic' which can be converted into two more bedrooms and bath. The kitchen has a refrigerator, stove and Bendix washer; the living room a fireplace and a built-in Admiral television set.[12]

Potential buyers only needed a down payment of $90, and mortgage payments were $58 a month for a house that cost under $8,000. In today's inflated dollars, this translates into a down payment of $735, and monthly mortgage payments of $475 for a $65,000 house.[13] Remarkably affordable, this meant that homeownership was within the reach of a budding middle class, ready to blossom in the new suburban world. Indeed, a house in Levittown was simple yet adequate for new households about to give birth to the largest surge in the U.S. population – the Baby Boom.

In terms of production, the Levitts refined a number of innovative home-building techniques that would become the hallmark of early suburban development. It was imperative for this construction company to implement efficient uses of materials, workers, and time, for without these methods Levitt and Sons could not have offered such cheap houses. The Levitts exclusively employed non-union construction workers to keep labor costs minimal. To economize the time to build a house, all lumber was precut and shipped directly to the construction site. Plus, roofs and support walls were also pre-built and delivered to Levittown. Houses did not have basements, and the company only offered a few standard versions of the house: a ranch-style or a Cape Cod-style. This uniformity of construction allowed Levitt employees to labor in an assembly line fashion, with each worker responsible for a particular aspect of the house construction.

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Table 1. Summary of major suburban policy initiatives.

Public Policy	Year(s)	Description
National Federal Housing Act	1934	Provided insurance to private mortgage loan company to protect lenders from risk and encourage long-term housing loans
Federal Home Loan Bank Board Redlining Policy	1935–68	Developed 'residential security maps' to segregate neighborhoods, fueling white flight from cities
Serviceman's Readjustment Act ('G.I. Bill')	1944–present	Provided Word War II veterans with a variety of social benefits including college tuition support and low-interest, zero down-payment loans for new housing in the suburbs
National Federal Housing Acts	1949; 1954	Created subsidies for slum clearance and urban renewal; required redevelopment of blighted areas
Federal-Aid Highway Act	1956–91	Connected cities, suburbs, and metropolitan areas with over 41,000 miles of roads and highways
National Federal Housing Act	1964–present	Created incentives to streamline FHA mortgage loans to meet additional demand for housing

The Levitts learned from automotive industrial pioneer Henry Ford that houses could be built in a similar way to cars. The results paid off. By 1948, Levitt and Sons produced 30 new houses a day, and demand remained consistently high through the 1950s.

The achievements of Levitt and Sons were only, in part, due to their innovative production techniques and forward thinking. Like many other new homebuilders nationally, they also enjoyed huge financial successes as the benefactors of federal housing public policies that promoted home-ownership among white, middle-class residents. On the unprecedented growth of new housing in the United States, William Levitt once remarked that, 'if it weren't for the Government, the boom would end overnight'.[14] His observation could not have been more fitting. As early as 1934, federal housing policy drove the growth of the housing industry. Capitalists like the Levitts understood early on that the government's housing policies would greatly benefit their industry, and ultimately the suburbs that they would build. Table 1 provides a summary of the major suburban policy initiatives, many of which focus on the aspect of housing.

Perhaps no other public policy impacted suburban development more than the creation of the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC). Historically, less than half of Americans owned a house. From 1900 to 1940, the home ownership rate remained stagnant at approximately 43 percent. After World War II, the rate increased to 55 percent in 1950, and

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then rose to 62 percent a decade later. In subsequent years, the proportion of Americans that were homeowners continued to grow such that by 2000, two out of three households owned their own house.[15] The tremendous growth in home ownership rates can be attributed to the policy goals of the HOLC. Created in 1933, the HOLC's mission was to lower housing foreclosures that had become so commonplace during the Great Depression. Using federally issued bonds, the HOLC purchased and refinanced over one million mortgages at a cost of $3 billion during its first two years of practice.[16] In his landmark book on U.S. suburbanization, *Crabgrass Frontier*, urban historian Kenneth Jackson noted that the '[HOLC] introduced, perfected, and proved in practice the feasibility of the long-term, self-amortizing mortgage with uniform payments spread over the whole life of the debt'.[17] Jackson captures the essence of the impact of the HOLC's practices on housing policies that subsequently led to a long-term, sustained boom of new construction of housing in the suburbs.

In addition, the National Housing Act of 1934 planted the seed for a suburban housing growth spurt. The Federal Housing Authority's (FHA), organized by the Roosevelt administration after the creation of the HOLC, was charged to reduce unemployment and grow the housing sector of the economy. The 30-year mortgage loan, guaranteed by the FHA, was the primary tool that the agency used to accomplish its mission. The Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 complemented FHA's efforts. Commonly known as the 'G.I. Bill', this legislation was aimed at returning war veterans to assist them with reintegration into society.[18] Veterans were able to take advantage of a vast array for social services. For example, health care benefits and college educational opportunities provided veterans a pathway to advance into the middle class.[19] Moreover, the government provided generous housing support to aid veterans with the purchase of a new house. Low-interest, zero-down payment loans were often afforded to these veterans.

Last, veterans and new suburbanites alike, benefited from housing legislation to allow these new homeowners to deduct the mortgage interest on federal taxes, thus encouraging even more residents to purchase houses. Later revisions to the legislation also provided tax deductions for state and local property taxes and other home improvements. By the early 2000s, the total value of these deductions approached $120 billion – making it of one of the largest domestic policy expenditures.[20] These housing policies thus became standard instruments in the federal government's toolkit to both stimulate the economy and grow a new suburban frontier. In fact, they were just the stimulus that suburbia needed to hastily grow on the metropolitan fringe.

Not all federal housing policies were as equally beneficial for all Americans. Racial and ethnic minorities, particularly black Americans, were often subjected to and the victims of discriminatory housing policies

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on the part of the federal government as well as the private market. One of the earliest institutional discriminatory policies was the practice of redlining. This term was used to describe a mortgage lender's refusal to grant loans in particular neighborhoods of a city, or make loans on less favorable terms, based on the racial composition of those areas.[21] In 1935, the HOLC developed maps with four neighborhood classifications in the largest cities throughout the nation to determine its lending practices. The maps were coded with the following names: Classification A was 'Best'; Classification B was 'Still Desirable'; Classification C was 'Definitely Declining'; and Classification D was 'Hazardous' – otherwise known as the 'red' area. It was in these areas, Classifications C and D, that a red line was drawn around these neighborhoods on the map, which then made it difficult for blacks and other minorities to obtain decent loans terms, if any, to purchase a house. Kenneth Jackson showed how the federal government used its own *Underwriting Manual* to guide the decision-making process in granting FHA mortgage loans. He quoted the manual as declaring, 'If a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes'.[22] Black Americans segregated in central cities, then, were systematically excluded from the affordable housing opportunities that so many white, middle-class Americans enjoyed at the time.

Redlining was not the only way that the government and real estate market discriminated against racial and ethnic minorities. The use of restrictive covenants complemented the practice redlining in subtle ways. A restrictive covenant is a legal obligation that becomes part of the deed of a house and property that stipulates that the seller and buyer abide by certain rules.[23] During the first half of the twentieth century, such covenants were used to maintain the perception of stable neighborhoods. For example, Robert Fogelson showed that many early suburbs such as Roland Park of Baltimore and Grosse Point of Detroit commonly used these legal tactics to exclude others.[24] Covenants typically included restrictions on the racial and ethnic composition of the potential buyer, limits on property uses, limits on noise, and requirements to maintain yards and gardens. They were legally binding contracts that required anyone who owned a property, then or in the future, to agree to such conditions. Black Americans were systematically excluded from purchasing houses in neighborhoods with such restrictions. While the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that restrictive covenants based on race or color were unconstitutional in 1948, de-facto housing segregation persisted for many decades – and it continues to be one of the defining features of the suburban housing market.[25] Sociologists Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton define this characteristic as a grave social problem in their aptly titled book *American Apartheid*.[26]

Similarly, the real estate practice of blockbusting was an indirect housing policy that was not only discriminatory, but it also fueled suburban

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growth. The story of blockbusting in suburban Baltimore provides a case in point. In the early 1950s, Edmondson Village was an older suburb located on the western suburban fringe of Baltimore City. Real estate agents attempted to convince white residents to sell their houses at below market prices. Exploiting residents' fears of plummeting property values, agents would tell white residents that blacks from the city were about to move into their neighborhood. Scare tactics were often employed to make the case to white residents to sell. For example, urban historians have documented that black women were paid to walk their baby carriages throughout white neighborhoods as real-estate agents knocked on the doorsteps of white residents, hoping to visualize the effect of neighborhood racial change.[27] Such practices were successful in Baltimore among other cities. After white residents sold, real estate agents would then increase the price of the house with the direct intent of selling to black city residents in search of the suburban dream. Between 1955 and 1965, nearly *every* white resident – some 20,000 – fled Edmonson Village, and an exclusively black residential population replaced them in just a decade.[28] Both the real estate industry and the FHA failed to confront this systematic discrimination until the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968.[29]

In summary, scholarship from the 1970s and 1980s provided urban historical accounts that were focused on the federal government's role in U.S. housing and transportation policy, which aided the development of a suburban nation in postwar America. The early work of Jackson and Gelfand represents an important contribution to the historical study of suburbs. These scholars effectively showed that government played an important role in shaping this movement from the city to suburb. The Federal Housing Administration guaranteed and subsidized mortgages for scores of returning war veterans, and advances in the technological production of housing meant that many new suburbanites had a new place to call home. Yet, not all Americans benefited equally. Racial and ethnic minorities, particularly blacks, were unable to gain access to the suburban dream due to the discriminatory practices of redlining, restrictive covenants, and blockbusting. The government's failure to alter the pattern of urban decentralization gave way to the creation of a suburban landscape fractured by race and class.

The Push and Pull of Suburbia

Scholars have developed a 'push-pull' framework for understanding the historic public role in developing the metropolitan fringe. This framework holds that a number of socioeconomic conditions in central cities *pushed* residents out of the urban core. Likewise, a variety of characteristics unique to the suburbs *pulled* residents to this new frontier. The push and pull process began after World War II as city residents grew dissatisfied

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Table 2. Summary of historical city-suburban push and pull factors.

Push Factors	Pull Factors
Social Characteristics	*Social Characteristics*
– Racial and ethnic diversity	– Racial and ethnic uniformity
– High population density	– Low population density
– Crime and riots	– Low crime
Economic Characteristics	*Economic Characteristics*
– Expensive land	– Inexpensive land
– High taxes	– Low taxes
– Public transit	– Automobile dependency
– Open, downtown retail corridor	– Enclosed, suburban shopping mall
Services	*Services*
– Old public infrastructure	– New public infrastructure
– Attempts to racially integrate schools	– Racially segregated schools
Built Environment	*Built Environment*
– Overcrowded, old housing stock	– Spacious, modern housing stock
– Congestion, noise, and traffic	– Open, quiet, less traffic
– Pollution and factories	– Cleaner air, residential landscape
– Urban renewal	– New development

with the state of urban living. The city was increasingly home to an overcrowded, dense array of neighborhoods, coupled with an aging infrastructure, that made it an unattractive place for returning war veterans to start a family. The suburbs offered an attractive alternative environment that featured new houses with a yard and a variety of other new amenities that residents perceived the city lacked. Thus, these forces together gave birth to one of the greatest population migration movements in the history of the nation – the journey from the city to the suburb. In the following sections, I chart out the push and pull factors that contributed to the suburban migration, and then I explore specific public policy areas in housing and transportation to demonstrate how the United States used political institutions to create the suburbs and American Dream.

In Jon Teaford's compelling treatise on the transformation of the American metropolis, *The Metropolitan Revolution*, he implicitly puts forth the push-pull framework to explain the changes in the distribution of the metropolitan population, namely the movement from city to suburb.[30] Table 2 presents a summary of the historical city-suburban push and pull factors. Socioeconomic status was an important determinant of suburbanization. In the early phases of mass suburbanization, white, middle-class residents comprised the bulk of migrants to the suburbs, while black, lower-class residents remained in the central city. The decentralization of the economy also contributed to the massive growth of suburbs. Yet another factor that pushed residents to the suburbs was the lure of a new public infrastructure and modern amenities. Urban renewal efforts to save the city served as the final major push factor to the suburbs.

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The postwar social composition of cities and suburbs varied dramatically. The central city historically featured a healthy diversity of racial and ethnic groups. The patterns of population migration provide a case in point. For much of the twentieth century, the city served as a gateway for a plethora of new residents in urban America. During the great wave of immigration, it is estimated that some 25 million Europeans arrived to the United States between 1900 and 1930, and nearly all of these immigrants settled in urban neighborhoods of the nation's largest cities. Similarly, during the pinnacle of the industrialized twentieth century, nearly 5 million American blacks migrated from the rural South to the urbanized North.[31] Black residents joined white residents and new immigrants to meet the surging demand for a manufacturing workforce. The city was the engine of the nation's industrial economy, and a racially and ethnically diverse group of city residents powered the growth of that engine through World War II. The city thus became a myriad of people from the reaches of the American Deep South to the shores of Europe. In short, while many groups settled in neighborhood enclaves, urban America was still nonetheless a vibrant place and home for people of many races, ethnicities, religions, and classes.

Whereas the rich racial and ethnic diversity of the city was an asset during the first half of the twentieth century, it proved to be tumultuous during subsequent decades. In fact, after World War II, the social diversity of the city began to push white, middle-class residents out of the city and to the suburbs as social unrest grew. Beginning in the 1940s, racial tensions flared in cities across the nation as a world war was fought and won and veterans began to return home in 1944. Such tensions caused a series of riots to break out in cities from the East to West Coast. Two of the nation's gravest riots, for instance, occurred in Detroit in 1943 and 1967. The Woodward Avenue Riot of 1943 was one of the earliest riots in urban America and drew attention nationally. A fight between blacks and whites over the alleged drowning of a black woman and her baby and the alleged rape of white woman on Detroit's Belle Isle Park sparked a controversy throughout urban neighborhoods, black and white. Looting and rioting ensued along Woodward Avenue, the city's principal commercial corridor. Blacks looted white-owned shops, setting fires to storefronts while a mob of 10,000 whites stoned and beat countless blacks. Ultimately, it took the mobilization of federal troops to quell the violence, but only after 34 people died and $2 million of property damage. Unfortunately, the 1943 riot was only the precursor to an even more tragic riot in America's Motor City. The Twelfth Street Riot of 1967 began when Detroit police raided an illegal bar and arrested all 82 patrons. Residents began to protest the arrests as excessive police brutality, and chaos quickly ensued in the surrounding neighborhoods. Thousands of residents soon joined the protests, and looting, violence, and the burning of buildings plagued the city for a week. All told, the riots proved devastating for

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Detroit: 43 residents died; over 7,000 residents were arrested; over 400 residents were seriously injured; over 400 buildings were burned and later demolished; and some $40 million in property damaged was reported. The turbulent story of Detroit's experience echoes the racial violence, crime, and overall social unrest in American cities from the 1940s to the 1960s. Such riots underscore a fierce competition that existed between whites and blacks for both a limited number of jobs and an inadequate housing supply during this period. These riots occurred at the peak of the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and the onset of globalization. Teaford captures the essence of race as a push and pull factor by noting that, 'many white Americans felt that the answer to the "urban crisis" was to live, work, and play in the suburbs and abandon the central city to troublesome blacks'.[32] Overall, the impact of the culmination of these social transformations made U.S. cities vulnerable and ripe for change – and suburbs appeared to be the prime benefactor from the turbulent times of the postwar urban experience.

The postwar economic structure of cities also paved the way to the suburbs. In the years following World War II, millions of veterans returned home to their urban neighborhoods to find them overcrowded and dilapidated. Land was expensive, and taxes were high in the central city. Virtually no new construction of housing units occurred during the war; therefore, demand surged for new and improved housing opportunities. At the same time, large companies began to suburbanize, and regional shopping malls were built in the suburbs. The market had transformed from the historic, outdoor, downtown retail corridor in the city to the new, enclosed, suburban mall. As suburbia quickly grew, it offered new residents places to work and play. The economic transformation that ultimately pushed millions to suburbanize was the decline of public transportation and the rise of the automobile. The construction of highways meant that streetcars, trains, trolleys, and buses took a backseat to the automobile.[33] New transportation technologies, coupled with a demand for new housing and jobs, facilitated rapid suburbanization. As such, economic activities decentralized toward the suburbs during this period.[34]

The state of public services in the 1940s and 1950s also pulled residents from the central city and pushed them to the suburbs. The infrastructure in the central city was dismal in the decades following World War II. The basic transportation system in cities suffered from old age and a lack of regular maintenance. Potholes and cracks could be found throughout roads in the city. Furthermore, the sewer and water systems in various cities on the East Coast like New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, were nearly a century old. Water was regularly contaminated and distribution was often inefficient. Electricity and gas networks were also generally disorganized and ineffective. Older cities were showing the long-term impacts of age, and this was evident in the crumbling infrastructure. Richardson Dilworth, in his persuasive book *The Urban Origins of Suburban*

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Autonomy, illustrates how the development and lack of maintenance in the urban infrastructure promoted, in part, the suburbanization and fragmentation of future suburban cities.[35] Beginning the late nineteenth century and continuing forward, residents that grew dissatisfied with the state of urban public services were able to 'break away' from the city and form their own municipality. This enabled new suburban governments to tailor an alternate package of goods and services that would better suit the desires of suburbanites.

Dilworth shows that in the case of the greater New York area, wealthier white residents of new suburbs could establish lower tax rates and provide higher levels of quality services than the central city counterpart. Thus, the public infrastructure that served as the backbone of the city was crippled by old age at the midpoint of the twentieth century. Rather than investing in the existing infrastructure for rehabilitation, many Americans instead chose to move to the suburbs and construct a new infrastructure for their new lives in this largely undeveloped frontier. For example, many New Yorkers chose to move to northern New Jersey during the twentieth century. Many suburbs incorporated to accommodate the huge population boom from New York City. Dilworth shows that suburbs like Clinton, Irvington, Bloomfield, and Orange incorporated under the Home Rule Act of 1917 that gave townships equal status in New Jersey to municipalities. This allowed small towns to levy tax on new residents to build new critical infrastructure and to grow so that the new suburban populations could be accommodated. By the end of World War II, the entire state of New Jersey was incorporated, and there were 567 suburban municipalities.

Perhaps no other municipal service was as contentious as the public school system. A telling example is the battle for racial integration that culminated during the mid-1950s. The U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 landmark decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* held that it was unconstitutional to segregate schools, and more broadly public institutions, by race.[36] In the *Brown* case, a class action lawsuit was brought by 13 black families against the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, holding that the separation and segregation of schools by race was unconstitutional under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Such separation, the plaintiffs argued, had caused decades of socioeconomic inequality. Students enrolled in white schools had long been afforded the greater resources – better teachers, more books, and superior buildings – than students enrolled in black schools. The Court unanimously agreed with them, and on May 17, 1954, the Court declared that, 'separate educational facilities are inherently unequal'. In doing so, the Court overturned the long-standing doctrine of 'separate but equal', that the 1896 case of *Plessy vs. Ferguson* had established.[37] To remedy the racial imbalance in schools throughout the nation's metropolitan areas, the Court ordered that white and black students be bused to other

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neighborhoods, or even other jurisdictions, to achieve integration. This meant that groups of black students would be bused to an otherwise majority white school, and likewise, groups of white students would be bused to an otherwise majority black school. Undoubtedly, this method provoked fierce opposition among blacks and whites.

In Baltimore, for instance, opposition was particularly ardent among residents in blue-collar neighborhoods. The fight over busing in Baltimore's Southeast neighborhood was closely watched. Residents mobilized and organized the 'Southeast Coalition' to prevent busing to and from their neighborhood. Churches, small businesses, local factories, and families rallied to 'protect their neighborhood' from blacks. In 1974, they protested what was coined as 'federal blackmail' and staged sit-ins in schools, and in one case, over 2,000 students blocked traffic outside of City Hall during rush hour. Then City Council member Barbara Mikulski joined in the fight and argued fervently that busing was an 'assault on urban working-class families'.[38] Ultimately, the community organizers were successful in their quest to keep their neighborhood a white enclave in the midst of a city with a growing black population. Southeast Baltimore remained insulated, and students were not bused.

Protests over integration and busing even occurred among the nation's highest elected officials. For example, in 1957, Orval Faubus, the Governor of Arkansas, ordered the Arkansas National Guard to form a blockade to prohibit the legal entry of black students into Little Rock High School. President Dwight Eisenhower was forced to respond to the state and local opposition in Little Rock. He deployed the 101st Airborne Division from Fort Campbell, Kentucky to maintain peace and permit the entry of black students. On July 25, 1974, the Supreme Court ruled that busing across jurisdictions was unconstitutional. This decision effectively halted the practice of busing nationwide.[39]

Without a doubt, the Court's declaration set into motion a series of events that forever changed race relations in cities and suburbs. The foremost implication was that the *Brown* case cemented the decision for millions of Americans to make the move to suburbia. To attract more whites, suburban developers capitalized on the fears that white, middle-class residents held of the black population. Whites feared that if their children were forced to attend an integrated school with blacks that it would unduly harm children. Whether whites held blatant or latent discriminatory views toward blacks, whites perceived that suburbia provided a 'safe-haven' from undesirable residents of the city. A move to the suburbs provided an escape route from the increasingly black city. Suburbia gave new residents the opportunity to establish their own municipality, thus giving the powers of local government to white, middle-class residents. Tools such as zoning and housing codes ensured that neighborhoods and communities would remain white, and therefore ushered a modern era of de-facto segregation. In essence, *Brown* was an

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impetus for 'white flight', and it had the unintended consequence of spurring even greater numbers of white, urban residents to flee the city for the suburbs. The integration of urban schools fueled the suburban growth of white, middle-class residents. Thus, urbanites became suburbanites in just a generation.

The last major push-pull factor relates to the contrast in the characteristics of the built environment. Urban renewal efforts in the 1950s and 1960s attempted to give central cities a makeover – a renaissance – with the hope of abetting the exodus of the white, middle-class population. In fact, numerous scholars have shown that urban renewal programs actually had the unintended consequence of *pushing* more residents out of the city, thus invigorating the process of suburbanization even more.[40] In the case of Baltimore, urban renewal had devastating effects on the population of West Baltimore, a historically black and economically deprived community. City planners sought to demolish the 'eyesore' of public housing projects and to 'clean up the neighborhood' using a bricks-and-mortar approach. In practice, urban renewal did neither. Instead, it displaced thousands of residents and left vacant land that ultimately turned fallow. Moreover, waves of violent crime, housing abandonment, and rampant drug use added to the instability of urban communities. This project, like many others nationally, drew the attention of both city dwellers and suburbanites. City residents that had the economic means to suburbanize left behind their urban neighborhoods for safer and cleaner suburban areas while suburbanites were not lured back to the city. By many accounts, urban renewal was a failure, and it simply reinforced the strength of the magnet-like attraction to suburbia.

A collection of social, economic, and physical conditions contributed to the forces that both pushed out urbanities from the city and pulled them to the suburbs. Race and class were two of the most important social factors that determined whether residents would suburbanize. The racial fissure in American society during the midpoint of the twentieth century was particularly evident in big cities and new suburbs. Fear of other people of different races; violent riots; and the prospects for the racial integration of public schools only exacerbated the racial divide. Thus, the desire to suburbanize to maintain distance was a quick and immediate action that the white, middle class took during this period. Other societal forces supplemented the social push and pull factors. The economy decentralized and became regional in nature. This gave new suburban residents a place to work and live. In addition, the suburbs offered new development of housing and infrastructure in an era when millions of city dwellers were desperate for such improvements. It is the collective nature of all of these factors that made suburbia so popular. The culmination of change in metropolitan residents' social characteristics, economic structure, desire for public services, and an improved built environment created the perfect recipe for the making a suburban nation.

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Let us now reflect on some new historical interpretations of the postwar history of U.S. suburbia.

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON SUBURBIA'S PAST

The suburbs did not only happen because social forces pushed and pulled residents from the city to the suburb. A new generation of urban scholars has recently challenged the notion of the push-pull model of suburbanization. In fact, an emerging body of literature has begun to illuminate new historical perspectives on the history of suburbanization. In their edited book *The New Suburban History*, Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue offer a provocative collection of essays that challenge the historical framework of the push-pull model that gave way to a white, middle-class suburban society. According to Kruse and Sugrue, new accounts of suburbia

> challenge an older scholarship that looks at the history of suburbs largely internally and, instead, [they] examine the ideological, political, and economic issues that bound the city and suburb together in the postwar world.[41]

Whereas the push-pull model emphasized the suburbs as separate, autonomous units from central cities, new historical perspectives offer new political insight that challenges this model and further complicates suburban history. In this section, I briefly take stock of these new contributions and situate their main arguments to the political history of suburbia.

Various scholarly accounts have challenged long-standing, historical social and economic stereotypes of suburbs. In recent scholarship, historians have attempted to dispel notions of race and class homogeneity in the suburbs. One such example is Andrew Wiese's work on black suburbanization. To date, the history of the suburbanization of blacks has largely been told by the popular press. In his book *Places of Their Own*, Andrew Wiese provides one of the first historical accounts of the suburbanization of the rising black, middle class in the early twentieth century.[42] Wiese documents how blacks clustered near industrial suburbs on the urban fringe as early as the 1920s around services areas and factories in the rural South. Wiese resituates the time frame for black suburbanization, setting the stage for movement to the suburbs well before World War II and the Great Depression. Wiese suggests that the political neglect of African Americans during this time period allowed many individuals to suburbanize. Other studies, such as Matt Garcia's study of the greater Los Angeles' Mexican citrus labor suburban industry, echo Wiese's multi-ethnic study of early suburbanization prior to World War II.[43]

The characteristics of black suburbs paralleled those of white, working-class suburbs – especially during the streetcar era. Black suburban households, like white ones, owned houses, raised children, and took pride in a yard and garden. While an emerging black, middle class was evident throughout the twentieth century, Wiese's greatest contribution is

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to correct any historical inaccuracy that early American suburbs were exclusively bastions for an elite white society. He also calls attention to the consequences of suburbanization: violence toward blacks, white flight, and discrimination toward blacks. Ultimately, this fueled a suburban environment that became increasingly segregated by race. Yet, Wiese shows that despite these challenges, black households made stunning progress during the last century as many more achieved middle-class status in the suburbs, dispelling any myth that early twentieth century blacks were exclusively rural and urban residents.

Regional dynamics on the West Coast also offer insight on fresh perspectives on suburban political histories – and in many cases, they vary in context, in time period, and in policy to the cases on the East Coast and Midwest. In *Magnetic Los Angeles*, Greg Hise offers a sharp contrast from the political history of Colonial suburbs. Urban planners and policymakers built Los Angeles intentionally in a suburban, decentered fashion because they were keenly aware and concerned for the clustered land use patterns that the East Coast produced. Racial and social segregation abounded in regions in the East, and L.A. planners attempted to avoid that design. In his case study of Kaiser Community Homes in Panama City, Hise argues that urban development in L.A. was the 'product of a planned dispersion of jobs, housing, and services throughout metropolitan regions'.[44] Hise goes on to demonstrate that planners promoted a network of decentralized urban nodes as early as the 1910s in order to avoid racial and class mixing and political organizing. Hise's contribution shows that planners were aware and active in suburban design to confront such challenges much earlier than regional planners in other parts of the country. At the end of the twentieth century, Los Angeles was as politically and socially fragmented as many other regions across the nation.

In a similar vain, Becky Nicolaides traces the history of the working-class suburb of South Gate, home to big industry in Los Angeles during the twentieth century.[45] During the prewar years, South Gate grew as a suburban enclave for young, white, working-class families. An abundance of industries in the automotive, shipping, and transit sectors meant that well-paying jobs were commonplace. As a result, South Gate grew as an affordable, stable, and close-knit community. Yet this prosperity was short-lived. Postwar America offered many new challenges for her residents. Social unrest in metropolitan L.A. began to threaten the security of residents in South Gate. Urban planners sought to integrate the school system, and civil rights protests were routine occurrences by the 1960s. Coupled with industrial plant closings and the threat of low-income housing, South Gate became a suburban landscape for anti-liberal, working-class residents. The prospects of social and economic diversity threatened these suburbanites, and residents resisted politically as long as they could. In the end, Nicolaides shows that older suburbs – not only cities – were home to social unrest and economic turmoil.

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The recent work of several other urban historians – in particular, Kevin Kruse, Matthew Lassiter, Lisa McGirr, and Robert Self – offers yet another fresh perspective on the historical intersections of race, class, and space in metropolitan America. In the wake of the civil rights movement and the desegregation of schools and other public institutions, suburbs were in a state of flux. Kruse, Self, and Lassiter each offer a similar critique of the push-pull model, arguing instead for a more metropolitan-oriented political framework that takes into account racial and spatial relationships in suburbs and central cities.

At the core of these arguments is that the backlash thesis, originally put forth by Thomas Sugrue's work on the urban decline of Detroit and Arnold Hirsch's work on urban renewal in Chicago, fueled white suburbanization in the midst of racial unrest.[46] Violent riots and failed urban renewal projects in central cities only served to exacerbate racial tensions, create ghettos, and fuel suburbanization. Continuing in the tradition of Sugrue and Hirsch, Kruse, Lassiter, and Self shed new light onto these perspectives by showing that new forms of spatial politics evolved during this era. First, in Kevin Kruse's book *White Flight*, he demonstrates, through a study of metropolitan Atlanta, that whites fled the central city as a result of the civil rights movement and mounting pressures from the desegregation of public institutions.[47] At the peak of the 1960s, fierce neighborhood battles occurred throughout Atlanta over housing desegregation and the integration of public schools. Some neighborhoods remained insulated and white, while others ultimately integrated. In areas that grew increasingly black, white Atlantans suburbanized to avoid racial integration. To maintain the suburban white stronghold, suburbanites then developed a new conservative politics that stressed individual rights and freedoms. This was typically expressed in the form of lower taxes, privatization, and total abandonment of the central city. Ultimately, Kruse shows that metropolitan Atlanta was spatially transformed into a new region as a result of a white backlash against black integration.

Second, in his book *The Silent Majority*, Matthew Lassiter offers a stunningly similar account of racial and political change through suburbanization.[48] Drawing on the example of Charlotte, North Carolina, Lassiter uses the case of court-ordered busing to illustrate how racial and political tensions shaped metropolitan Charlotte. Resistance to the integration of schools led to the large suburban sprawl of southeastern Charlotte. White, economically mobile residents suburbanized to secede from the threat of an integrated school system. As busing ensued, blacks and working-class whites grew frustrated at the disproportionate burdens that busing placed on them, and so they united politically. Ultimately, a successful coalition of

> supporters of integration launched a 'fairness and stability' campaign that eventually drew support from a broad cross-section of the metropolis: black

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> parents who demanded a reduction in their children's transportation burdens, northside and westside white families mobilized for busing equalization, suburban moderates and liberals who endorsed full compliance [of court-ordered integration], and business leaders who simply wanted the uncertainty to end.[49]

Thus, Lassiter shows how residents in Charlotte used a new suburban politics to cater to the interests of a broad-based coalition in the city and suburbs, which mitigated the initial white backlash to the racial integration of schools.

Third, Lisa McGirr confronts the rise of the new American Right in the suburbs on the West Coast. Focusing on suburban Orange County, McGirr shows that three social forces were key to the rise of the suburban political conservatism in Orange County. The existence of Christian evangelicalism, the arrival of Midwestern middle-class families, and Southern Bible Belt conservatives each fueled the growth of the region's suburban political culture according to McGirr. Highly educated men and women who worked in defense contracting industries found the suburban lifestyle in Orange County to be very isolating and desolate. Its infrastructure segregated the population. This structure translated into a political activism against communism and ultimately support for Ronald Reagan. Suburban Orange County has remained a bastion for the political right since this transformation in the 1960s.

Fourth, in his book *American Babylon*, Robert Self convincingly demonstrates how a complex political-spatial relationship evolved between the city and surrounding suburbs in metropolitan Oakland.[50] A metropolitan-wide political movement evolved as the struggle to save Oakland ensued. Just as Kruse and Lassiter demonstrate, Self also shows that there was a white backlash to the efforts to revitalize Oakland and empower its disenfranchised black communities. According to Self, the backlash was more complicated than white flight from the central city. Whites sought economic security as well as racial isolation; the deindustrialization of Oakland was also perceived as a threat. Consequently, middle-class whites suburbanized to a variety of East Bay suburban communities, capitalizing on cheap land, affordable housing, and easy access to highways and jobs. Self goes on to describe that the white backlash took shape politically in the suburbs, yet it was aimed at blacks in the central city. As social and economic unrest persisted in Oakland despite the election of black mayors and revitalization attempts, suburbanites grew increasingly weary of the liberal state and high taxes. As a result, the suburbs mobilized politically and passed Proposition 13 – the largest limit on property tax in the nation. In the end, Self argues that middle-class whites not only suburbanized to escape the economic and racial insecurities of Oakland, they also formed a new anti-urban politics to avoid the escalating costs of an increasingly troubled central city. Metropolitan forces – demographic, spatial, and political – ultimately characterized the complex backlash in greater Oakland.

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In sum, a new body of literature emerged at the brink of the twenty-first century that offered new historical perspectives on the making of the nation's suburban society. This urban scholarship offered new insight on the historical patterns of suburbanization, drawing into question the traditional push-pull model of suburbanization. These studies illuminated the complex historical diversity of suburbia in racial and economic terms. Moreover, they complicate the notion that suburbs were autonomous units in metropolitan America. New perspectives on suburbia ultimately show that political forces, characterized by racial, economic, and spatial terms, capitalized on the metropolitan political system through the development of city-suburban relationships.

Concluding Thoughts

The phenomenal growth of suburban areas, both in the size of the population and in the number of suburban developments, illustrates that a new spatial form of living became the clear preference for millions of Americans. The era of mass suburbanization still persists today, albeit in a different form. The urban history of this process illustrates that the metropolitan boundary continued to expand for the better part of the past century as the crabgrass frontier matured.[51] The urban fringe became increasingly popular, and the older established areas fell out of favor. This is, in part, a function of the persistence of political support for public policies that promote new fringe development.

In general, residents continue to be pushed out of central cities and pulled to the suburbs. Similar processes are at play within central cities such as gentrification.[52] This process may affect suburbs, too, as the aging process continues in suburbs and redevelopment occurs. Suburbs, like cities, might then gentrify. A number of factors explain this phenomenon. While suburbs are undoubtedly more diverse today, many residents continue to live in segregated suburban areas that are fractured by racial and class divisions.[53] Public policies in the areas of transportation and housing also continue to serve as a ringing endorsement for the uncontrolled growth of suburbs. Competing perspectives on suburbia show that residents in suburbs also developed a spatially oriented politics on a metropolitan scale to maintain the suburban landscape. The political history of suburbanization thus represents a diverse and complex past. The consequences of this history had devastating effects on the lives of urban residents. These policies did not benefit all people equally. By and large, the winners moved to suburbia, and the losers were left behind in the central city. In too many cases, the winning group was comprised of white, middle-class residents while the losing group largely encompassed black, lower-class residents.[54] And so, it is the interaction of private preferences and government policy that ultimately shaped today's suburbs.[55]

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In closing, it is important to reflect on the future prospects for suburbia since there is increasingly more evidence that 'trouble in paradise' exists.[56] Urban historian Robert Fishman conducted a survey of scholars and found that the decline of older, inner-ring suburbs emerged as one of the most important new challenges facing metropolitan America in the new century.[57] These inner-ring suburbs refer to the developments that grew up in the first suburban generation of the 1950s – the Levittowns of yesterday.[58] A half-century later, these suburbs are mature and show signs of social and economic decay. The aging process has decentralized from city to inner-ring suburb, and the very challenges that the urban core faced three decades ago are now omnipresent in these suburbs today. Fueling the decline of inner-ring suburbs is the growth of exurbs – the far-flung suburbs located at the rural fringe of metropolitan areas. *Washington Post* report Joel Garreau attracted national attention to the growth of exurbs in his book *Edge City*.[59] Such suburbs have garnered many critiques – political, policy, social, economic, and environmental – yet, despite increasing criticisms, more Americans than even reside in exurbs. Without a doubt, one of the great questions that will face historians and social scientists alike will be the question of the impact of uncontrolled growth in the metropolis on people and places.

The process of suburban decline offers urban historians and scholars of suburbs a ripe opportunity to push the boundaries of the current scholarship on suburbs. Since suburbs now exhibit symptoms of a life cycle, historians have a chance to examine the legacies of these places and reflect on the factors that gave way to the process of decline. Historians McManus and Ethington echo this sentiment, and go ever further in their critique of studies:

> It is not at all clear, however, that the current wave of revisionism in suburban studies has transcended the limitations of the dichotomies it seeks to refute . . . With very few exceptions, the field of suburban studies has ignored the question of what happens to a suburban seedbed *after* it has been planted: after it ceases to occupy the leading edge of a metropolis, once it no longer stands as the historically typical suburban form.[60] (emphasis added)

The urban history of our cities provides insight into the destiny of ailing inner-ring suburbs in metropolitan America. Whether they become the cities of tomorrow remains an important question.

Short Biography

Thomas J. Vicino is an assistant professor of urban affairs in the School of Urban and Public Affairs at University of Texas at Arlington. His research and teaching interests include urban policy and planning, and socioeconomic change in suburbs. He is the author of the forthcoming book *Transforming Race and Class in Suburbia: Decline in Metropolitan Baltimore* (Palgrave

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Macmillan, 2008). His recent work also appears in the peer-reviewed journals such as *Urban Studies*, *Urban Geography*, *The International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, and *Geography Compass*, as well as the *Encyclopedia of American Urban History* and several books chapters. He holds a Ph.D. in public policy from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

Notes

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