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Final Exam Question #1

In the decades after World War II, advances in technology and a booming economy helped lead the way for massive changes in the United States. Soldiers returning from war to reunite with their families, the expansion of the automobile in the average consumer household, and a booming economy helped in large part by the war effort, all factored into the shift from urban to suburban living. The urban core of the city was eclipsed by the newly popular suburb on the outskirt of the city as people wanted to flee the city as the suburbs were considered cleaner and healthier to live in and were thought to be a good place to raise a family. This led the city to become hollowed out and forgotten which led to high vacancy rates, crime, poverty, and a lack of life. The postwar expansion of suburbia, like most times of development in urban context, sacrificed the rights and opportunities for minority communities so that white communities could become the vision that they had wanted without the diversity of other races or cultures. The trend of flight from the city to the suburbs was one that would not last forever, and the tides have begun to change in favor of the city once more. New developments and investments in the downtown core coupled with a younger population’s obsession with quick on-demand services and the American downtown has seen an increase in population and investment once more. This paper will take the abstract mentioned above and created a detailed account of the shifts and changes in the city and surrounding metropolitan statistical areas of American cities into modern day. It will dive into the causes, effects, and processes of the various patterns of urban development in this time.

Residential decentralization has been a trend from some of the early days of cities histories. The period between the 1880s and 1920s saw a centralization of commercial activity in the downtown core but saw a trend in decentralization of residential life. As Fogelson said “As men went downtown to work, women went downtown to shop” (Fogelson 11). Low-density, single-family homes with gardens were constructed in the fringes of the city and the middle-class saw this as an opportunity to stray away from the noise, traffic, stench, and vice of the industrial city. The suburb was seen as a return to nature and the idealization of it created a sense of anti-urbanism and a moral landscape for healthy recreation and leisure. These small homes on the outskirts of the city then shifted from unplanned fringe to planned subdivisions as investors and developers saw the potential the suburbs could bring. The new moral landscape ideal saw the desire to separate the public life of the commercial and political sector and the private life of the family and home. Unfortunately, the desires to return to the countryside and build a good home was a dream for most and was impossible for minorities. Social homogeneity became increasingly rampant, a stark contrast to the antebellum city and prior countryside. Class and racial differences began increasing and increases in immigration to the country and the great migration did not help this trend. People became quickly fearful of immigrants stealing employment opportunities and of minorities for a fear of them lowering property values and causing crime. In addition to racial and class homogeneity, the homes being constructed were also of a homogeneous nature as the price, quality, and style were all similar to one another. The design of the early suburb was categorized by elite suburban mansions two to three miles from downtown connected by streetcar lines.

The early twentieth century saw a shift to kit homes to increase affordability for a rising suburban class. Federal policy such as the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Homeowner’s Loan Corporation (HOLC) helped to create this affordability. These homes could be purchased from retailer catalogs such as Sears and could either be constructed by individuals or contracted out. The neighborhoods these homes were built in, continued the trend of the incorporation of nature into the area and focused on breaking with the existing grid and creating winding streets lined with a tree canopy with the inclusions of parks and recreation spaces. There was limited access to main roads as houses were seen to be better to live in if they were tucked away in the side streets rather than on main boulevards. Seller mentions this in his publication *Suburban Country Life* where he says, “nature itself had become ever more suffused with anxieties about human health” (Seller 12) The middle-class suburbs had restrictions on race, acceptable uses, and gender to maintain and enforce homogeneity through the use of restrictive covenants and homeowner’s association vigilantism. This led to blacks and minorities being largely excluded even though there was a small black middle class. This left blacks to live in outlying semi-rural communities or in urban “slum” housing. The suburban neighborhood was also one that had social norms for women baked in as the home was seen as a private nurturing space for children. This “cult of domesticity” led to tensions within progressivism about a women’s’ role in the home and new spaces of domestic masculinity rose such as with the shed, basement, and garage workshop.

While the suburb was growing in popularity during this time, it wasn’t until the 1930s-1940s that housing and the suburbs began to grow at a rapid speed. The stock market crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression led to construction crashes with a 95% drop in residential construction and a 90% decline in home repair expenditures. Mass foreclosures and declining home values coupled with large unemployment levels meant that new federal policy and stimulus were desperately needed for the country. Herbert Hoover believed that the private sector would work out the struggles that were being faced in the stock market, but shantytowns known as “Hooverville’s” were evidence that his hands-off approach was harmful to the country and he lost the presidency by a landslide to Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) in 1933. FDR and his economic policy helped to build the country back and created many services and administrations to help the American people. Pertaining to American cities and homeownership however, there was a federal promotion of homeownership with single-family dwellings and a national priority to protect and promote homeownership with the goals of reducing social strife and boosting consumer demand. Two innovations that came out of the FDR administration to accomplish these goals were the Homeowners Loan Corporation (HOLC) in 1933 and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) in 1934. HOLC enabled protection of homeowners from foreclosure with refinancing of homes with low-interest loans. FHA lowered down payments of homes and extended mortgage repayment to lower the burden of purchasing a home. New construction had minimum standards in place and saw federal guarantees for long-term residential mortgages. These led to a fall in interest rates and an increase in housing. It became cheaper to buy than rent and led to single-family homes being favored and constructed more than multi-family homes. The housing boom of the 1920s bypassed black communities however and high rents compounded by job discrimination and lower wages meant the suburbs were out of reach for many black individuals and they were confined to the urban core of the city were rents were cheaper and more multi-family housing was available. HOLC began to map out the safety of loans with maps and almost always categorized the black urban core as being hazardous and attracting undesirable elements with lower rents. White communities and the suburbs were categorized as in-demand and expected to be stable and safe to lend to.

The urban core of cities was now seen as a place where low-income blacks lived and a place for crime and disinterest. This viewpoint of the urban core of the city remained for some time but trends in the contemporary metropolitan areas are challenging this as many urban cores have seen significant revitalization. Urban renewal programs in the 1950s from the federal government provided funds for slum clearance as the bulldozer was seen as a hero for cleaning up the city. Eminent domain was a tool used in this endeavor to modernize the city to prevent future blight as new highways, civic centers, arts complexes, multi-use business centers, sports arenas and more were constructed, often in the modernist brutalism style with public and private assistance. Slums were also replaced with low-income public housing in the form of high-rise modernist utopia buildings. Public housing was a tool in the displacement and containment of black communities as slums were cleared and black communities needed new housing to move into. Many were excited to see new housing, but the promises made were not kept as there was not enough public housing constructed, and the units that were constructed were often not kept in good condition. Two-thirds of those displaced in urban renewal were black and these communities were walled off by projects such as highways. The black middle-class fought and struggled for housing equality but it wasn’t until the Fair Housing Act of 1968 that discrimination in the rental, sale, and financing of housing was prohibited. This act wasn’t entirely beneficial however as it led to class differentiation and growing distance between affluent and poor blacks. The late 1960s saw urban renewal as a failure and the future of the downtown core was seen as uncertain. Racial unrest in the downtown obsolescence led to further white flight and decreases of investment and diversity.

By the late 1980s and 1990s, neoliberal urban development came in to replace the failed urban renewal projects of the 1950s and 1960s. Empowerment Zones, federal block grants, and tax incentives were created with the aim of private sector investment in the city. Public-private partnerships and local development corporations led to local governments to fund capital improvement projects to encourage private developments. Cities such as Baltimore, MD, focused on constructing tourist destinations to attract more people and tax revenue. It was thought to feed the “downtown monster”, or face missed opportunities for development. (Friedman 209) Downtown boosterism continued the trends of the 50s and 60s to attract middle class consumers and workers to shore up downtown retail and create new pedestrianized spaces. These efforts worked as they started a “back to the city” movement and led to key social changes with gentrification and new investment. The charm and convenience of the walkable city led to downtown becoming a residential zone once again. The demand to live in the city led to construction of higher-end housing units and the displacement of the existing population and affordable housing and intra-neighborhood mobility was lost. Car-oriented landscapes were redeveloped towards mixed-use walkability and the reintroduction of mass transit systems helped to spur even more development. Development led to transit hubs which led to higher land costs which led to higher value and rents which leads to more development that seldom includes affordable housing units in the plans. Some individuals were not happy for these new developments and organized efforts to block gentrification and development (NIMBY). These concerns were attempted to be shored up with gentrification with justice in mind as there was upgrading and reinvesting in neighborhoods without creating displacement, but anti-growth advocacy is still a big role in the city.

To sum up, the city and surrounding areas have seen immense amount of change from their founding’s, but it hasn’t been until contemporary times that the city was seen as a good place to live and raise a family in. Efforts in the 1950s onward have attempted to reinvigorate the city but were all mostly found to be ineffective and more harmful than beneficial. It wasn’t until efforts in the 1980s and 90s that attitudes towards living in the city became positive and people had a desire to move back to urban life. Much progress has been made in recreating the city, building on diversity in the suburbs, and increasing quality of life for residents, but much more work is needed to be done. If current trends continue, more and more people will be moving back into the city which will create a beneficial public ambiance.

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