

A COUNTRY OF CITIES

A MANIFESTO FOR AN URBAN AMERICA



**VISHAAN
CHAKRABARTI**

FOREWORD BY NORMAN FOSTER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SHoP ARCHITECTS

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FOREWORD

Norman Foster

I am in Manhattan. I'm sitting in my eighth-floor apartment, drawing and looking out across Central Park. The phone rings—it's Vishaan. "I have something I want to show you," he says. "Let's have a coffee." Fifteen minutes later I take the elevator and then walk a couple of blocks to Madison Avenue. We're meeting at Sant Ambroeus—a neighborhood café and a perfect place to get together with friends. Vishaan is waiting for me. He's walked his son to school and taken the subway up from Union Square, where he lives. We order and Vishaan hands me a draft copy of this book. He asks if I will contribute a foreword. I know of his great commitment to the subject as an academic, with a body of work in the public realm as well as private practice, and so of course I immediately agree.

Now imagine if that scene had been played out in Detroit or Los Angeles, or any other sprawling American metropolis. We would both have jumped in our cars and headed for the freeway. One of us would doubtless have gotten stuck in traffic. Instead of fifteen minutes, it would have taken us an hour, with all the attendant frustrations.

One of the beauties of Manhattan is that it is a compact, dense, walkable city. It has thriving neighborhoods with a strong sense of community; it mixes living and working and has a messy vitality; it has an incredible park, as well as other smaller green spaces, and an extraordinary range of cultural and civic amenities close at hand; it has an excellent public transportation system; car ownership is very low; and it is natural to walk or take the subway, which is faster than driving.

It sounds attractive, doesn't it? So why are all cities not like that? The fact is that before the age of the automobile, most cities followed that pattern—the polar opposite of the relatively new car-dependent, zoned, and suburban metropolis one finds across much of the world today. Of course, we cannot turn back the clock, but we can set out development strategies to ensure that existing cities adapt to become more sustainable; and we can propose new urban models for the future, which learn from the best of the past. It has been said that if you wish to look far into the future, then you should first look far back in time.

Across the globe, an increasing proportion of the population is becoming urbanized. Currently, more than half of the world's population lives in towns

and cities. By 2030, that proportion will have risen to two thirds. One result of this global population shift is the growth of megacities of unprecedented size. Significantly, the top six are all on the Pacific Rim, which the World Bank predicts will be the fastest-growing region in the world over the next five years. Look at that list of megacities and the immediate reaction is to note its diversity. Study it more closely, however, and you discover that cities around the world have common problems and can learn from one another.

We know that cities that sprawl are wasteful in terms of energy, land, and other resources. To put this into perspective, in industrialized societies, buildings and the transport of people and goods between them account for 70 percent of the total energy expended. Naturally, if you increase urban densities, one result will be shorter journeys, with fuel savings and carbon reductions. Compare Manhattan with Detroit and you find that the average Manhattan resident uses less than one fifth the amount of gasoline consumed by a Detroit citizen and a third of the electricity, even though the two cities have comparable climates. Other benefits also follow. For instance, recent data from the U.S. suggests that economic growth and job creation are stronger in city centers and poverty is rising faster in the suburbs. There is also a link between climbing gasoline prices and foreclosure rates in suburban communities.

Critics may denigrate such advocacy with the myth that higher urban densities lead to something poorer—literally and also in terms of quality of life. Examine the evidence, however, and you find the opposite is true. Macau and Monaco, for example, are among the densest communities on earth, yet their roots lie at opposite ends of the economic spectrum. Medium-density European cities such as Berlin, Copenhagen, and London typically offer a desirable lifestyle with higher property values. In most cases, proximity to a park or garden square is a major factor. Mayfair and Belgravia in London, for instance, pair with Hyde Park, just as the Upper East and West Sides of Manhattan relate to Central Park. The same applies in less affluent parts of cities. For me, the most desirable parts of Brooklyn, in New York, are on the borders of Prospect Park; and it is interesting to note that in the recent competition for a cultural district in West Kowloon, the people of Hong Kong voted for the solution that featured a new waterfront park.

Sustainability requires us to think holistically, and this is as true of a city's infrastructure—the “urban glue” that holds the city together—as it is of its architecture. I would go further and argue that the quality of a city's infrastructure impacts the quality of life more directly than does the quality of its individual buildings. Asian cities have been at the forefront in renewing their transportation infrastructure. Hong Kong, for instance, decided in the 1960s to invest in a mass-transit railway system. Today, that network is so comprehensive that it accounts for the majority of journeys—more than four million trips every weekday. Departure for the airport begins in the city center, when you board a luxurious train—the equivalent of the first-class cabin in a wide-body jet.

It is self-evident that if we are to create sustainable urban communities—not just in America, but across the globe—we have to take a number of essential steps. We have to build to higher densities in order to conserve land and reduce energy use; we must create neighborhoods that combine workplaces with housing, and where transport connections, schools, parks, and other amenities are all within walking or cycling distance. Most important, we have to create inspirational urban environments where people want to live.

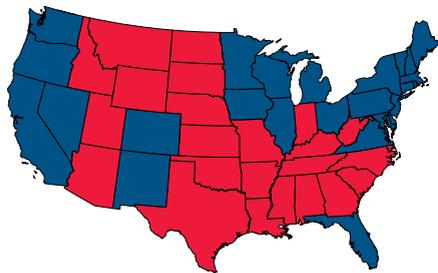
The contribution that design can make in this regard is profound and far-reaching. My own experience of numerous cities across six continents bears this out. But architects and planners can only ever be advocates. That is why *A Country of Cities* should be essential reading—not just for members of the many related professions engaged in urban design, but also for those in local and central government departments who shape planning policies and the politicians who enact them. Many of the environmental problems we face today are exacerbated by inappropriate policy decisions that were made in the past, often rooted in a lack of knowledge. Let us learn from those misjudgments and, with greater hindsight, pursue sustainable urban strategies for the future. With this book, Vishaan Chakrabarti shows us the way forward.

A COUNTRY OF COUNTRIES: OF HIGHWAYS, HOUSES, AND HEDGES

The United States today is a country divided, a country of countries. Gridlocked by bitter partisanship, economic decline, environmental degradation, and growing social inequity, our nation is stuck in traffic with little visible in the rearview mirror or on the road ahead. When we ask how did we get here, or how do we move forward, do we consider the subway not taken? When we ask how we lift ourselves up, do we consider the elevator not used? While the same tired debates define our political rhetoric, do we consider whether our profligate use of land is the primary culprit behind our vexing national malaise?

As I illustrate throughout these pages, our reckless subsidization of suburban sprawl is arguably the leading cause of our most pressing challenges, from foreclosures, to unemployment, to unfunded schools, to spiraling health-care costs, to climate change, to oil wars. Yet this overarching issue never surfaces in the national discourse. In election after election, our presidential candidates rarely utter the words “city” or “suburb” in their speeches, as if the way in which Americans live is irrelevant to the state of the nation.

For politicians of any stripe, questioning the American lifestyle and the taxpayer dollars that underwrite it would represent unthinkable risk and would likely require expertise well outside of their grasp. Most elected officials originate from the legal profession and rarely consider questions of *where* Americans work and live as topics worthy of debate.¹ Despite all the changes politicians promise, reforming our sprawling, gluttonous lifestyle is never among them. To the contrary, the policies advanced by both parties continue to fuel a country of highways, houses, and hedges.



CAN WE UNITE?

AMERICA TODAY

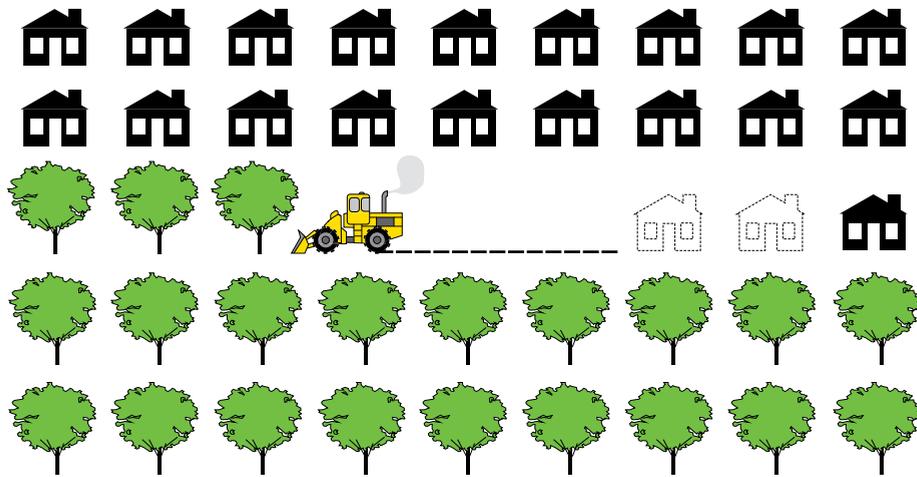
LOW VOTER TURNOUT

In 2012, only 4 in 10 people living in America voted in the presidential election. Those who did were split almost evenly along Democratic and Republican party lines.



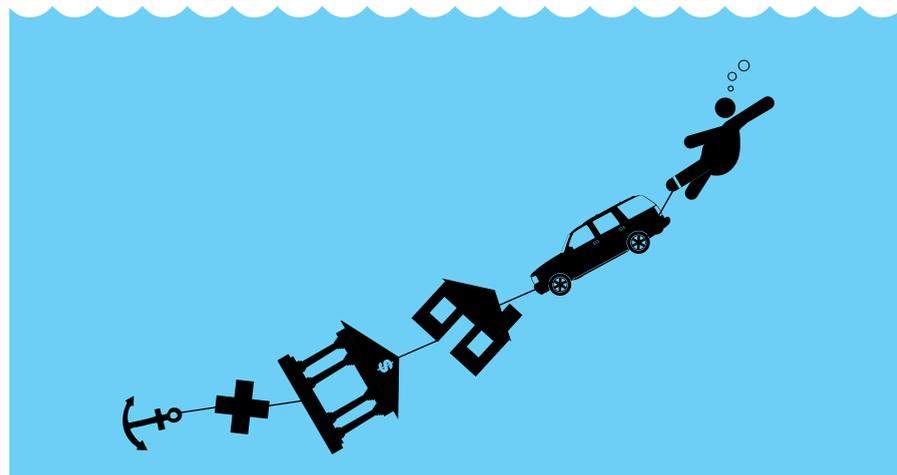
RAMPANT LAND CONSUMPTION

Land development has quadrupled since 1945, increasing at about twice the rate of population growth.



AMERICANS ARE UNDER WATER

Nearly 11 million Americans hold mortgages with outstanding balances that are greater than the value of their homes.



A Country of Cities contemplates a renewed nation, a country of trains, towers, and trees. By removing the legal, economic, and moralizing incentives for sprawl—most of which are rooted in misguided and outdated public policy—we can realize a more prosperous, more sustainable, and more equitable nation. Throughout this text, I unapologetically advocate for this alternate path and reach the unavoidable, data-driven conclusion that cities, once put on a level playing field with suburbs in terms of federal, state, and municipal government policy, would be the silver bullet for many of the ills confronting our nation and planet.

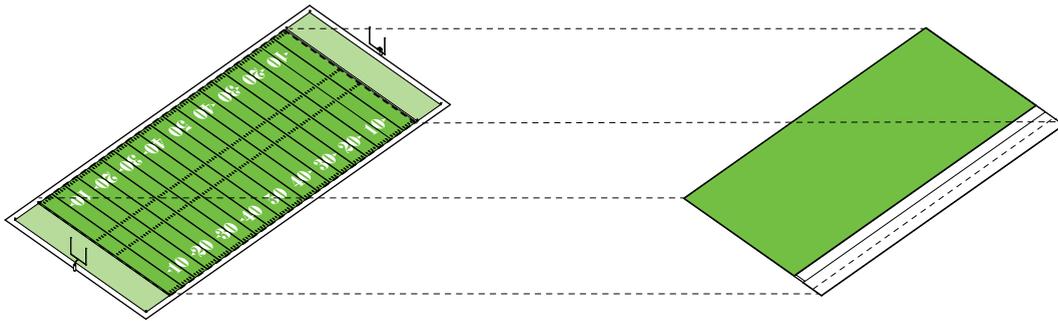
A Country of Cities is not a survey of urban design and planning initiatives intended to further the agenda of like-minded urbanites. In it, I hope to expose the larger social and political forces that are holding the country's progress hostage regardless of ideological allegiances, and with particular concern for mounting evidence regarding the declining competitiveness of America's socioeconomic structure.² Rather than debating the existence of challenges such as stagnating wages, increasing inequity, failing public health, or a deteriorating environment, I instead assume that such problems have infected the very structure of the nation and propose a measured and proven structural cure: cities.

For the sake of clarity, I define a “city” as a place that can provide significant ridership for rapid mass transit such as a subway network, which typically requires a density range above 30 housing units per acre.³ Such concentrations of population can be found across the United States, from St. Louis to Chicago, to Seattle, to Miami. This definition is not intended to belittle places of lesser density; it simply asserts that while villages, towns, and suburbs may exhibit some of the same valuable characteristics as much denser environments, they cannot be scaled to accommodate the millions that big cities with metros can so effectively house. Ironically, some might call a transit-based definition of a city elitist, but it is confounding and somewhat comical to think that subways as an organizing force for human habitation could be construed as elitist in a nation dominated by Escalades and Yukons.

In the pages that follow, I use the terms “city” and “hyperdensity” interchangeably to indicate densities greater than or equal to 30 housing units per acre. This transit-based criterion is critical for differentiating our big and real cities from the kind of easy urbanism being perpetrated by so much of the architecture and planning professions today. Such efforts may create slightly more compact places served by an expensive and barely used trolley, but where most residents still have to drive to get a quart of milk, and often do so in a light truck disguised as a car. This distinction between promoting truly transit-based hyperdensity versus density of any

A LENS FOR VISUALIZING DENSITY

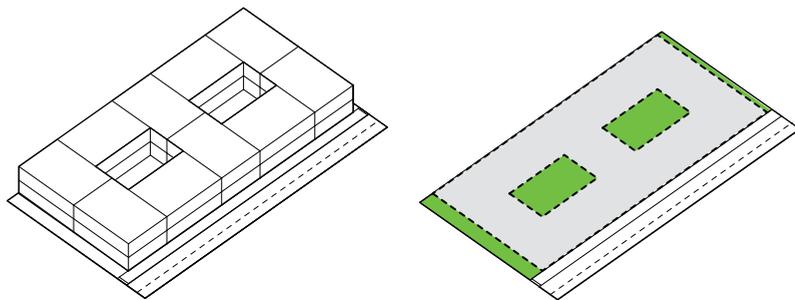
One acre of land is 90% of a typical football field.



DENSITY CAN TAKE MANY FORMS WITH VARYING QUALITIES

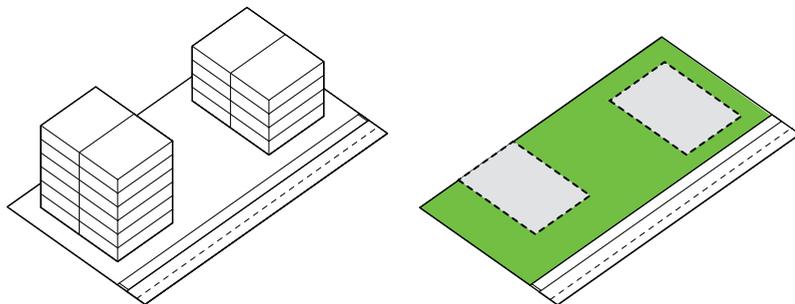
30 DWELLING UNITS PER ACRE AS LOW-RISE APARTMENTS

Horizontality has a limited ability to accommodate open-space uses on the ground plane.



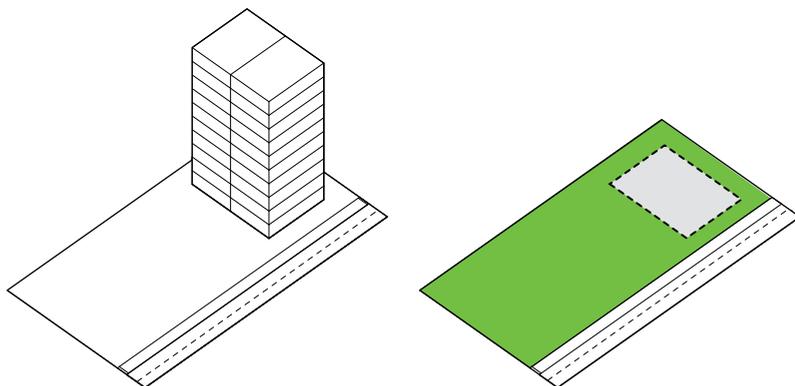
30 DWELLING UNITS PER ACRE AS MID-RISE APARTMENTS

Verticality allows for greater open-space uses on the ground plane.



30 DWELLING UNITS PER ACRE AS HIGH-RISE APARTMENTS

More height allows for the maximization of open-space uses on the ground plane and the vertical intensification of amenities in the tower.



sort is an essential distinguishing factor between this book and the abundance of “urbanist” literature available today.

Most so-called urbanists, out of fear of backlash, conservative myopia, or both, tend to ignore big cities for more politically palatable and less socially diverse microfantasies of “new,” “walkable,” “regional,” or “retrofitted” urbanism. In such microfantasies, the strengths of small-town America—which does share some of the strengths of big-city America in terms of density, community, sustainability, and walkability—are romantically grafted onto the car-dependent landscape of the American suburb, a romance that attempts to force the suburbs into a “both-and” condition with small towns, to borrow the terminology of architect Robert Venturi. Yet, on closer inspection, such grafting actually creates a “neither-nor” condition, a tormented love child of small-town and big-city America that is neither walkable nor drivable, more mutant than hybrid, more bastard than breakthrough.

The crisis of our profligate land use cannot be answered by the fashionable callings of most urban planners and scholars today, be they the stylistic neo-conservative ponderings of new urbanism, the overemphasis on community control at all costs, or even the admirable but trendy wonders of bicycles, electric cars, and locavorism. Rather, we must understand this as a national density crisis resolvable only through holistic policy reforms, many of which are suggested in the latter half of this volume.

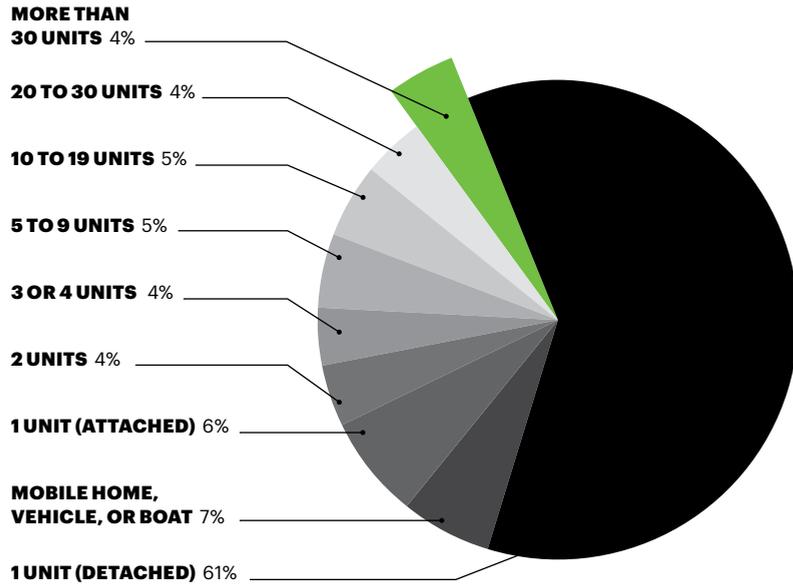
Instead of attempting to retool failing suburbs, and while remaining respectful of small towns across this great nation, I focus throughout this text almost entirely on the economic and environmental engines of this country that hide in plain sight: our big cities, be they Charlotte, Houston, Portland, Atlanta, Chicago, Nashville, Los Angeles, or New York. Our society is in a crisis in terms of the economy, the environment, and income inequity: this is no time for making small plans, adjusting life at the margins, or retrofitting failure. Our national landscape is broken and must be fixed using all the tools of the Swiss Army knife, not just the tweezers.

It is important to note that my assertions stand on the shoulders of many, particularly those outside of the urbanism professions. A host of scholars from different points along the political spectrum, including economists, environmentalists, and public-health experts, have made a variety of findings supporting the central premise that American cities offer a cure for many of our most urgent problems. One of the primary goals of *A Country of Cities*, however, is to integrate these findings from various disciplines into a comprehensive and approachable argument for the advantages of urban living writ large, an argument that equally challenges both the left and the right wing of our political system to consider, embrace, and promote market-driven urban growth in the United States.

While the same tired debates define our political rhetoric, do we consider whether our profligate use of land is the primary culprit behind our vexing national malaise?

AT WHAT DENSITIES DO AMERICANS LIVE?

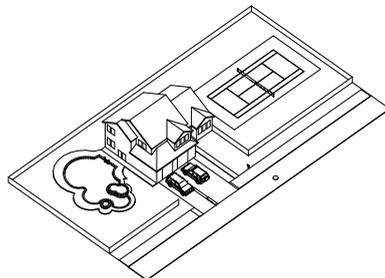
The vast majority of Americans are living in very low densities, defined by dwelling units per acre.



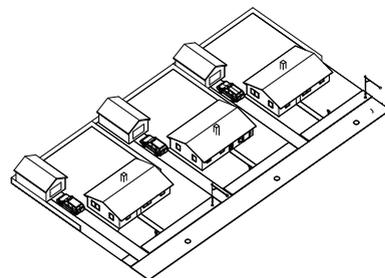
DENSITIES UNABLE TO SUPPORT RAPID MASS TRANSIT



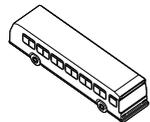
AUTO-BASED TRANSIT



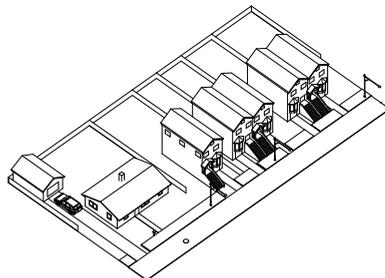
1 dwelling unit per acre



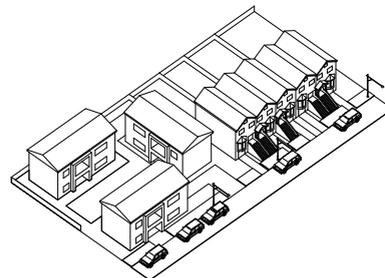
3 dwelling units per acre



BUS-BASED TRANSIT



10 dwelling units per acre



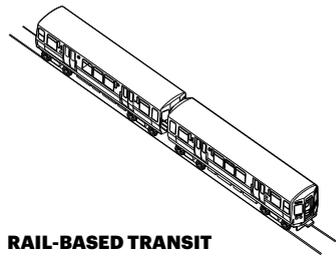
20 dwelling units per acre

Free choice is a critical foundation of our society. For this reason, *A Country of Cities* contemplates a nation in which most Americans would choose to live in density above 30 units per acre—not due to sanctimony or regulations, but due to the better quality of life people would experience at these densities, a condition that we will explore in detail in the forthcoming pages. This hyperdensification of the already developed areas of the United States would, in turn, trigger the increased land values needed to help fund the transit, school, and other improvements that such density would necessitate. Certainly, many Americans would choose to live in small, rural towns away from big cities in such a model. However, exurbs on the outskirts of cities reachable only by highways would gradually atrophy due to the removal of the incentives that sustain them. Suburbs connected to large cities by regional rail would become much denser around their train stations, creating a wider regional urban boundary that would represent a new form of a transit-based, multi-centered American city similar to contemporary London. Single-family homes would continue to exist in this framework, but without subsidization, most people would instead gravitate toward cities.

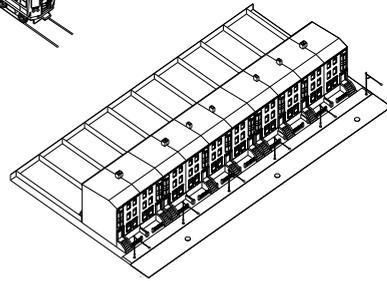
Hyperdensification is an approach that, if used ambitiously, could serve as the catalyst for a new era of progressive and prosperous stewardship, not only for our nation but also for economies that are transforming worldwide and looking to the United States for leadership. Just as the gated communities of growing cities worldwide echo our own suburban enclaves, a hyperdense America could provide an economically and environmentally sustainable model for a rapidly developing world to embrace.

Given the ambitious reach of this proposal, I have written *A Country of Cities* as a manifesto. Clearly, it is not within our immediate future for most Americans to desire life at such high densities. But it is important to remember that the suburbs barely existed at the turn of the nineteenth century; they were spurred over decades by the sweeping ideas of men like Garden City proponent Ebenezer Howard, automobile titan Henry Ford, and urban renewal czar Robert Moses. We must now adopt a new paradigm in a new century for a new set of conditions, a paradigm that would reverse our declining economics, environment, and social equity and be as all encompassing as the earlier visions that drove us into this calamitous ditch. This new paradigm imagines a United States where government policy would place cities and suburbs on a level playing field and where Americans, in response, would embrace urban life for greater economic opportunity, for deeper environmental wisdom, and for a more just society—goals that are at the core of our founding as a nation and embodied in our Declaration of Independence. In short, people would seek out cities to fulfill their dreams of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

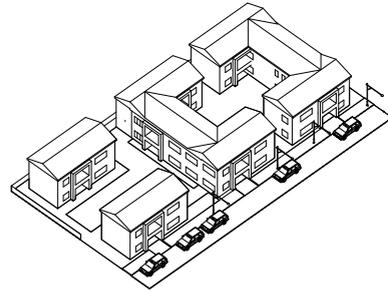
DENSITIES ABLE TO SUPPORT RAPID MASS TRANSIT



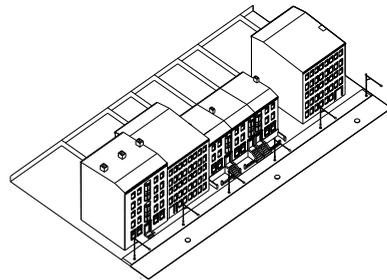
RAIL-BASED TRANSIT



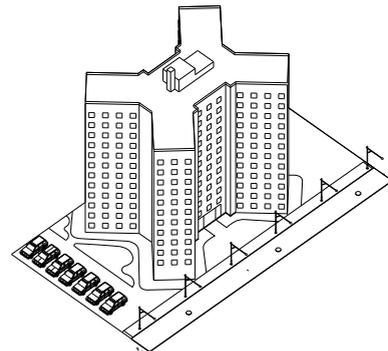
30 dwelling units per acre



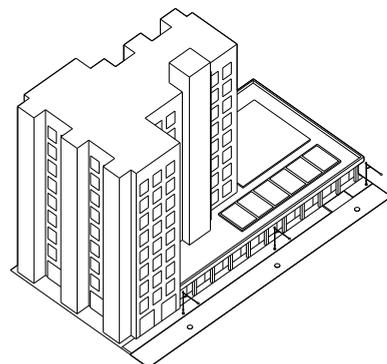
40 dwelling units per acre



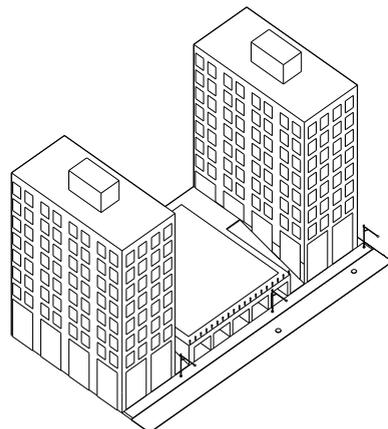
50 dwelling units per acre



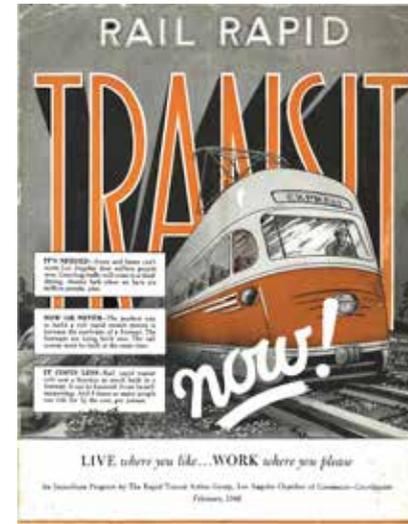
75 dwelling units per acre



100 dwelling units per acre



150 dwelling units per acre



RAPID RAIL TRANSIT NOW!

Mass-transit advocacy in the mid-twentieth century attempted to galvanize political support for new cable-car projects in downtown Los Angeles.

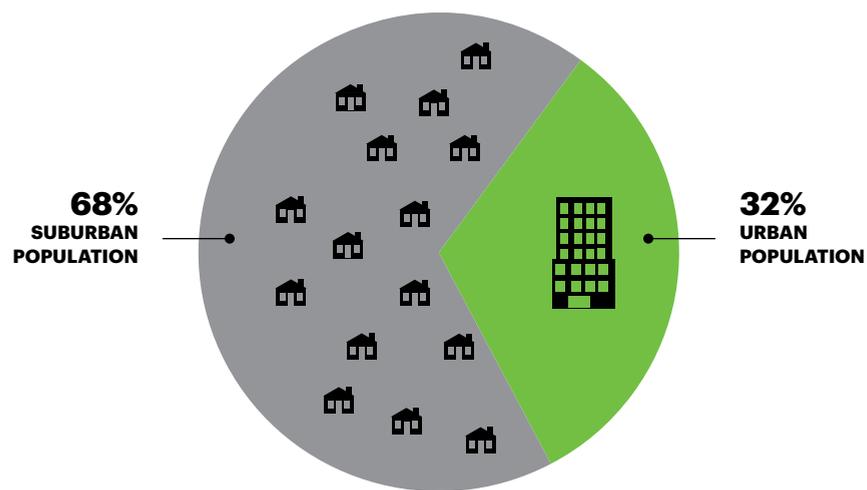
grew out of pro-American policies as a result of the War of 1812 and the push to make the country less dependent on imports. The policies that built the urban juggernauts of the Industrial Revolution focused on the expansion of transportation, the harnessing of energy, and the improvement of industrial processes.⁴

But a number of well-documented factors that originated in the 1920s, gained momentum after World War II, and reached their apex in the 1970s caused America to sour on its cities. With roots dating back to 1922, the infamous National City Lines cartel formed by corporations including General Motors, Firestone, and Standard Oil led to the elimination of many of the electric streetcar routes across the country, including those in Los Angeles.⁵ While the automobile allowed for the suburbanization of the San Fernando Valley, and funds from expansive development bolstered redevelopment in L.A.'s central business district, little could be done after 1946 to resist the momentum behind low-density residential development outside the city's boundaries. In 1948, an attempt to reposition downtown as a major retail destination with a program called "Rail Rapid Transit Now!" failed to gain enough votes for approval by the city council, despite having the support of business leaders and San Fernando Valley developers alike.⁶

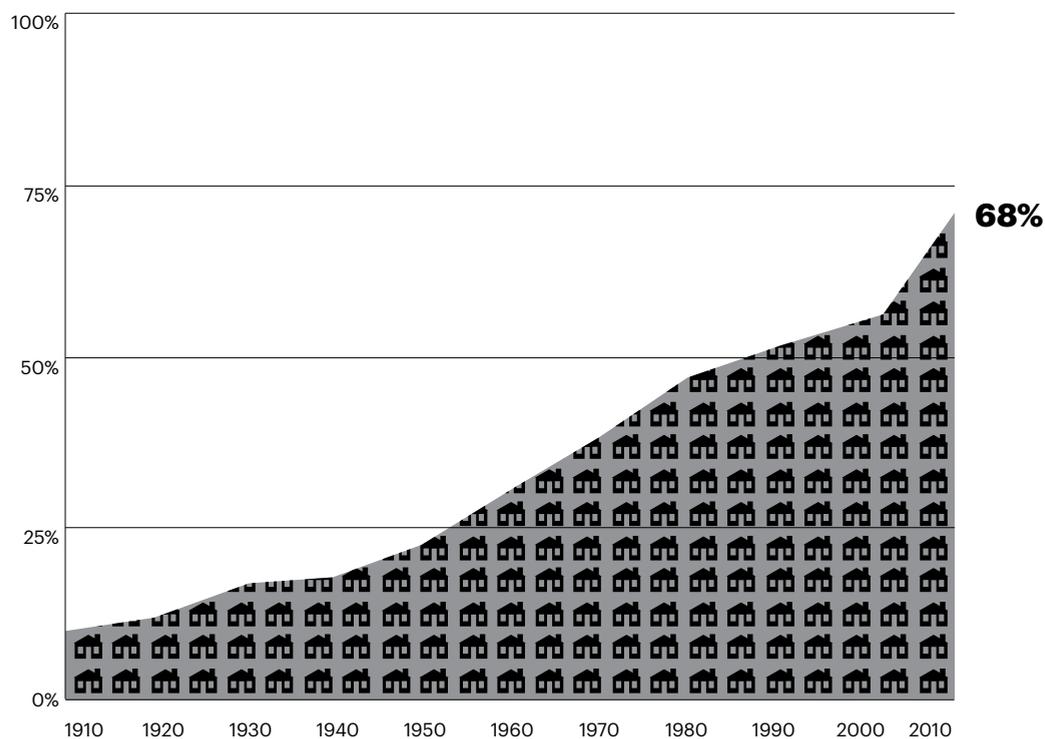
A decade earlier, as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, the National Housing Act of 1934 created the Federal Housing Administration and the Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation to stem the tide

As a society, we would need to overcome a series of barriers to arrive at this new urban frontier, but none so formidable as the substantial anti-urban cultural biases we would have to uproot as a nation. Anti-urbanism is not necessarily endemic to Americans or our history—to the contrary, much of the nineteenth century bore witness to new manufacturing processes that engendered new products and favored the juxtaposition of labor, capital, and resources. This inherently urban way of life was in sharp contrast to rural living throughout the United States at the time, and the need to cluster, along with the invention of steam-powered engines, elevators, and structural steel, enabled the creation of cities. Pro-urban policies

THE MAJORITY OF AMERICANS LIVE IN SUBURBS



AMERICANS LIVING IN SUBURBS, 1910-2010



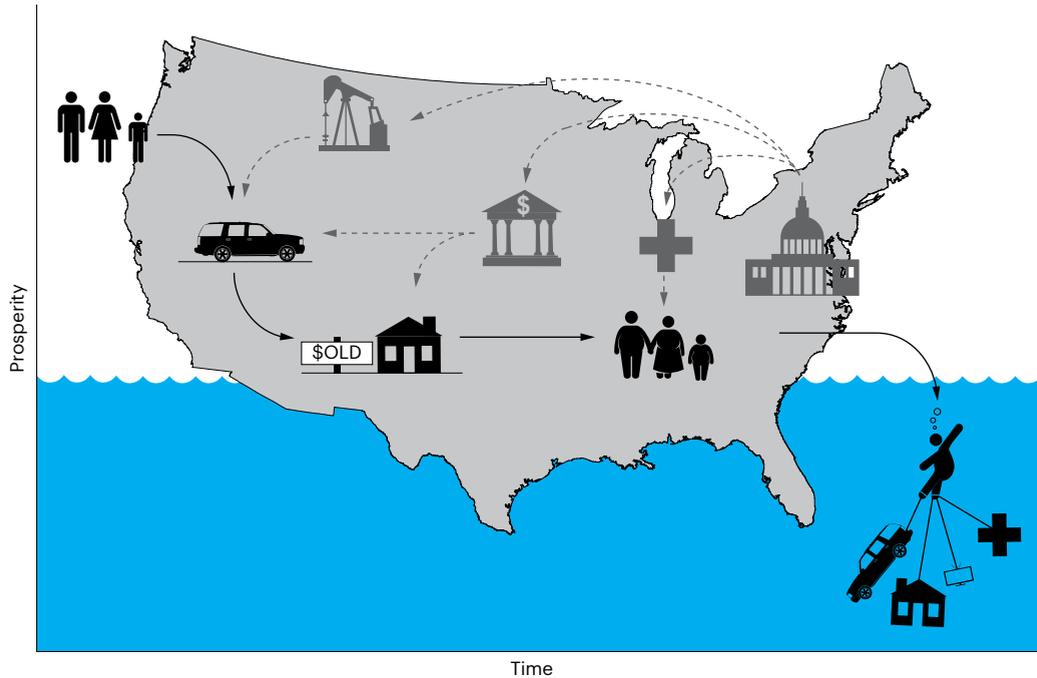
of foreclosures resulting from the Great Depression and to make housing and mortgages more affordable. As a result, more people could afford down payments and interest on mortgages and the market for single-family homes became much larger than it would have been had it not been manipulated.

After World War II, government subsidies again poured into the marketplace with the passage of the Federal Highway Act of 1956 and intense lobbying by the National Association of Realtors.⁷ Further enabling homeownership through the expansion of roadways into, out of, and between cities, the law's unprecedented level of funding for highway construction resulted in an otherwise impossible level of suburban development. In the summer of 1956, while Elvis soared to popularity with three number-one hit singles, racial tensions flared nationwide. Skepticism about cities and public safety began to grow, and by April 1958, the country reached the depths of a recession—Detroit, for example, hit 20 percent unemployment.⁸ The cold war fed the impetus to disperse the population, and in 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis solidified fears that communism could prevail over capitalism if the Soviets continued to target American cities.

Extraordinary as it was, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 only exacerbated the anxieties of the many Americans who fled cities in record numbers, leaving the urban cores of the United States largely devoid of the tax base that local businesses and residents provide.⁹ As city services declined due to dwindling municipal budgets, and nuclear tensions rose, middle-class whites—and blacks with means—fled for the suburbs. There, selective housing policies ensured that only certain Americans would populate new housing subdivisions and nearby schools; African-Americans were often redlined in many communities, impeding their access to mortgages. The poorer residents who remained in the inner city provided an insufficient tax base, especially for places like New York and Chicago, where crime grew as businesses and jobs decamped, causing local governments to plummet into debt. The Detroit riots of 1967, and the social unrest of 1968 alongside President Lyndon B. Johnson's expansion of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, reflected a period of deepened mistrust in the federal government.

By 1973, Watergate provided the proverbial nail in the coffin for most Americans whose faith in Washington was already declining. Beyond the political scandal, the economy had performed poorly, with persistent high inflation, during President Richard M. Nixon's first term. Though prospects improved with the end of the Vietnam War, the ensuing oil crisis directly affected pocketbooks throughout the country, especially for people reliant on gas-guzzling cars and cities now caught in a vicious downward spiral. By 1975, New York City's finances hit bottom, and when the city sought rescue funds from President Gerald Ford, his public refusal in a speech was

TODAY: THE AMERICAN SCHEME



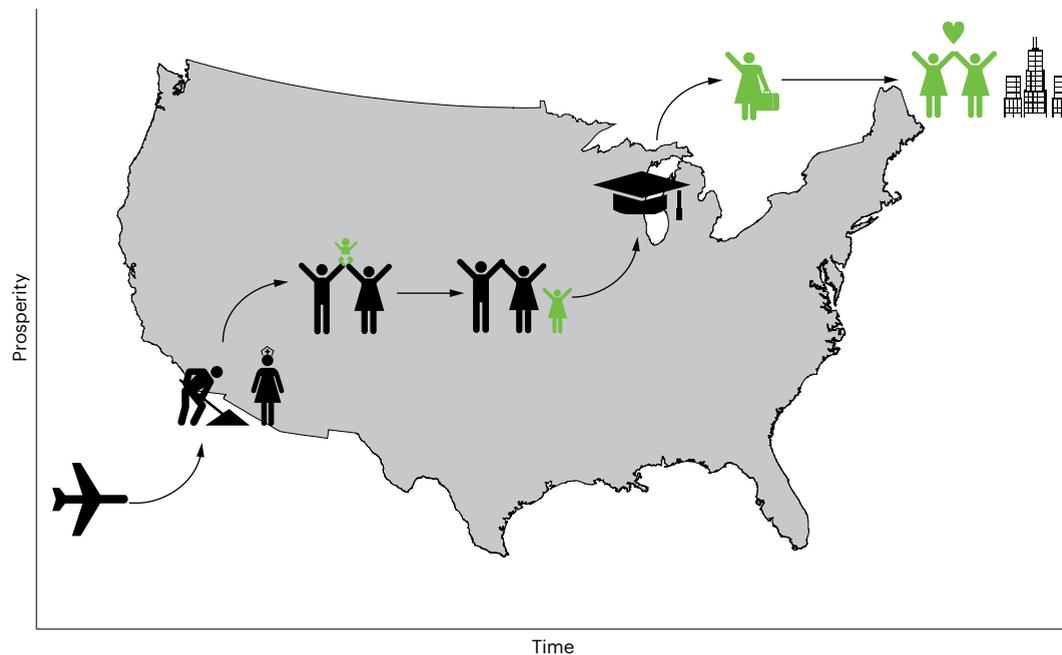
reported by the *New York Daily News* under the famous headline (and misquotation): “Ford to City: Drop Dead.”¹⁰ Ford eventually led efforts to secure aid for New York from congress, but his initial denial did as much to galvanize New York’s business leaders to rescue the city as it did to bolster the anti-urban sentiment that had pervaded much of the century.¹¹

The suburbs, therefore, are not a mere reflection of the way people want to live, or even a reflection of true market forces, but a synthetic consequence of history. The suburbs are largely a creation of “big government,” an explicit, policy-driven, subsidized scheme that has guided how we live, work, and play. Over the last century, this has created the most consumption-based economy the planet has known—that is, until the music stopped: the twenty-first century debuted in America with an epic collapse of the housing market (particularly the single-family housing market), the rapid acceleration of climate change, and the largest division between rich and poor in the postwar era.¹²

And it is on this last point, of growing social inequity, that we must ask what, if anything, this American Scheme of suburbia has to do with the American Dream of opportunity, a dream that so many of us cherish. While many origins of the concept have been proposed, it is most often ascribed to historian James Truslow Adams, who in 1931 wrote of the American Dream:

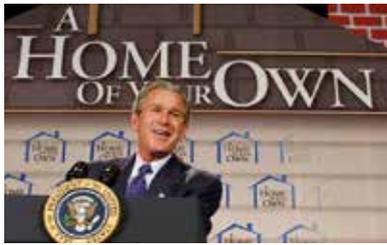
It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.¹³

TOMORROW: THE AMERICAN DREAM



It is notable that this definition of the American Dream contains no reference to single-family home ownership, unlike what would ultimately become President George W. Bush’s “ownership society.” By contrast, President Barack Obama has spoken of the American Dream as an aspiration of equal opportunity regardless of how or where one resides. To be sure, cities left to their own devices do not ensure equitable outcomes—evidence of income inequity can be found across the spectrum of American communities, and sometimes more so in our largest cities. But one of the key questions we must address is whether opportunities for lower-income Americans and immigrants could be greater in cities than elsewhere if they were designed for this purpose. It is this effort—toward building opportunity—that is the key to the American Dream, not some scheme pulling us toward lawn mowers, traffic jams, and snow shovels. This important distinction is what sets apart the true and steadfast American Dream from an American Scheme now in free fall.

**The suburbs are
largely a creation of
“big government,”
an explicit, policy-
driven, subsidized
scheme that has
guided how we live,
work, and play.**



BUSH'S "OWNERSHIP SOCIETY"

President George W. Bush at a press conference in Atlanta, June 2002

A conflation of the American Dream and the American Scheme was fostered in our culture by the television and film industries, which came of age simultaneously with the federal programs that fueled suburbanization. It is critical to understand the consistency with which, whether intentionally or unintentionally, popular culture and its imagery has reinforced government policy during the twentieth century, particularly given that we live in a democracy. People often believe what they see and, in turn, vote on their beliefs. Moving pictures—with cinema popular since its inception and television a staple of the American household—became the primary arbiter of culture and consumption for our society in the decades following World War II.

With the baby boom, Americans were barraged with footage heavily biased toward the house, the car, and the requisite appliances. It is remarkable to consider the anti-urban movies produced in the brief but critical period of 1945 to 1950. The 1948 film *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* stars Cary Grant as a New York advertising executive trying to break free of city life by buying a suburban fixer-upper that turns into a money pit. (Contrast this with his work from just a decade earlier: *Holiday*, *Bringing Up Baby*, and *Topper* all star Grant as an urbanite to the core and, in some cases, visibly uncomfortable in the countryside.) Even the Manhattan-based 1947 Christmas movie, *Miracle on 34th Street*, features a young heroine pining for a suburban home, a wish that, of course, the Macy's department store Santa ultimately grants. The previous year gave us the most enduring Christmas classic of all, Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. The film's protagonist, George Bailey, yearns to travel, see cities, and build infrastructure, but must learn the hard way—and only with the help of divine intervention—that city life is corrupting and immoral. With young women becoming prostitutes soon after they arrive in the city, the film stops just short of invoking Sodom and Gomorrah to convey its relentless moralizing.¹⁴

Decades would pass before movies or television shows would depict any form of suburban dystopia. It is not until the emergence of the extraordinary 1975 cult classic *The Stepford Wives*, released in a time of social upheaval, that Hollywood presents to mainstream Americans a contrarian view of suburban life. Only recent films such as *The Ice Storm* and *American Beauty* hold a candle to the satire of Stepford's mind-bending lifestyle, with its uniquely searing feminist critique of the suburb's impact on women.

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By contrast, the film most commonly beloved among architects, the 1982 epic *Blade Runner*, depicts the city as dystopia, with poverty below, wealth above, and a menacing prognostication of American cities becoming more Asian in the most damning sense. Ultimately, for all of its compelling visual power, Ridley Scott's classic is an Anglican cautionary tale that warns against Los Angeles becoming a Tokyo or Hong Kong, complete with the stereotype that, should we let down our guard, we will become urban automatons, or "replicants." Ironically, as we will see in the pages that follow, it is precisely from the great cities of Asia that Los Angeles, under the leadership of Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, is finally adapting the means to become more economically and environmentally sound.



IDYLIC SUBURBIA IN MOVIES

Between 1945 and 1950, Hollywood aggrandized the suburbs.

- 1 *It's a Wonderful Life*, 1946
- 2 *Miracle on 34th Street*, 1947
- 3 *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, 1948

It is not until the 1980s that the anti-urban bias in American film and television begins to markedly shift. With the globalization of capital and the consequent shift in the economics of leading cities the world over, certain cities like New York take on a different cultural meaning as places of opportunity.¹⁵ In this period, films like *Working Girl* and *The Secret of My Success* and television shows like *The Cosby Show* appear, offering an optimistic but simplistic vision of urban prosperity, with only a few films, including *Do the Right Thing*, providing a critique of the uneven access to this new urban opportunity.

Into the nineties, as urban crime fell, contemporary movies and television began to show a wider range of both urban and suburban settings, with new cultural signals regarding the potential merits of city life. Although federal energy and housing agencies continued to promulgate suburbia with modifications of the CAFE standard that reclassified SUVs and minivans from trucks to cars, Americans during this period began to return to cities in response to the employment opportunities, energy prices, and social life associated with denser areas.¹⁶



DYSTOPIC SUBURBIA IN MOVIES

- 1 *The Stepford Wives*, 1975
- 2 *The Ice Storm*, 1997
- 3 *American Beauty*, 1999

A 2012 *Wall Street Journal* article indicated that American cities are now growing faster than their suburban counterparts for the first time since the 1920s.¹⁷ Another article published a year later by MSNBC summarized the reasons for the change in growth patterns and attributed the phenomenon to factors that may or may not be temporary: the slump in the economy (temporary), the inability of young people to afford down payments for mortgages (temporary), and a preference to live in places that don't require driving everywhere (not temporary).¹⁸ In his book *The Great Inversion*, Alan Ehrenhalt writes extensively about this trend and its causes, highlighting national case studies of urban rediscovery and labeling this shift “demographic inversion.”¹⁹

While this “inversion” is irrefutable and, some would argue, welcome, few examine the potential long-term benefits of this trend—particularly if government rather than promoting suburbanization instead encouraged urbanism, or at least gave it an even chance. The necessary changes would include modifying or curtailing the vast array of federal policies

that currently subsidize suburban America, including: phasing out the federal home mortgage interest deduction (MID); ceasing the backing by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac of large mortgages that otherwise would not be underwritten by the private market; removing subsidies for the oil industry; reclassifying SUVs and minivans as light trucks; allocating federal transportation dollars by population, and distributing those dollars fairly across all modes of transportation, including rail and mass transit, instead of disproportionately funding highways and runways; streamlining the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) to drastically reduce the red tape associated with urban development and building large-scale infrastructure; and, finally, pricing fuel to reflect what economists call the “negative externalities,” or the actual price of gas if the societal costs of pollution and congestion were included (many economists put this price at \$10 or more per gallon).²⁰



URBAN DYSTOPIA

Blade Runner, 1982

forcefully put forward by economist Richard Florida and others.²²

Such tectonic policy reform would require fundamental changes to the status quo of each political party. Anti-urbanism is not just a conservative stance—many liberals also fail to understand the power of cities to transform our economy, better our environment, and increase social opportunity. Most self-designated environmentalists are dead wrong in their emphasis on individual feel-good actions like putting solar panels on McMansions. More professionalized environmental organizations tend to focus on burdensome regulatory requirements that often impede infrastructure and sound urban development by requiring, for instance, complex and expensive environmental impact statements, which can delay or destroy projects. And while some extreme conservatives like former Speaker Newt Gingrich and the Tea Party consider an urban agenda a takeover of the American Dream—not to mention a United Nations plot to overthrow the U.S. government—most mainstream conservatives understand the economic power of healthy American cities.²³

As we will see in the pages that follow, such policy reforms would dramatically improve our economy, our environment, and our chances for equal opportunity. Achieving consensus for these changes, however, would be a tremendous challenge, and would require a recasting of the political spectrum as we know it. People are accustomed to their subsidies, particularly those in the middle class, who tend to believe they are not subsidized at all.²¹ The uproar over eliminating the home-mortgage deduction would light up the split screen alongside the “get your government hands off my Medicare” sentiment. But increasingly, politicians need to get honest with their constituents. The MID is enormously expensive in a deficit-laden era; it unfairly subsidizes large homeowners, who are typically suburban, over renters, who are typically urban; and in a mobile economy, it incentivizes people unwisely to not only take on unaffordable mortgages but also tether themselves to homes that hinder mobility should their jobs move from one part of the country to another, an argument



SUBSIDY DENIAL

Tea Party protest, circa 2010

Even a “severe” conservative like former Governor Mitt Romney was for smart growth before he was against it.²⁴

The bipartisan nature of anti-urbanism goes back much further in our history, lurking with Henry David Thoreau, deep in the American mindset. The idea of subdividing America into a one-mile-square grid was, after all, conceived by the liberal Thomas Jefferson, who was a lifelong skeptic about the concentration of power in cities. Ingrained in our very Constitution is the geographic dispersal of power, a balance against the supposed tyrannies of a truly representative democracy, in which population density would guide federal policy and resources unfettered by the special interests of the hinterland. Democrats are equally guilty of embracing anti-urban policies, reflecting in large measure a constituency steeped in the belief that sprawl is superior to tall.

Consider one last cinematic example that illustrates this point, a “progressive” children’s film directed at young hearts and minds to engage them in issues of environmental sustainability. In *Bob the Builder: Bob’s Big Plan* (2005), the most renowned builder in America today takes on the supposed ugliness of urbanization. For those unfamiliar with Bob’s character, he is an American everyman with deep environmental convictions and lots of gas-guzzling trucks. He lives in a progressive community of single-family homes in the American heartland, where he preaches his refrain, “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle.” In *Bob’s Big Plan*, our hero is working in town when he runs across the local architect, a mustached gentleman with a bespoke, crested, double-breasted blazer and a fancy office plastered with elite degrees. The architect explains that there is a competition for Sunflower Valley, an area nearby, and shows Bob his proposed design, a model of a gleaming city of skyscrapers. Bob leaves the architect’s office unsettled, remembering his childhood playing in Sunflower Valley. That night, he has a nightmare of skyscrapers and limousines destroying the unspoiled landscape, causing animals to flee and sunflowers to die, only to be replaced by synthetic flowers. Bob awakes with a jerk, realizing that he, too, must enter the competition. He furiously begins to build his own model, but instead of skyscrapers he proposes a scattering of a few small “green” houses, equipped with solar panels and windmills, all at a density of about four acres per house and unreachable by anything but automobile. Bob wins the competition, of course. The architect congratulates Bob and admits to the error in his urban ways. Bob wins the right to build



THE JEFFERSONIAN GRID

The Jeffersonian grid has guided rural and suburban development patterns in America since its inception, in the early nineteenth century.

his vision of Sunflower Valley, and the progressive mayor of his liberal town awards him with . . . a brand new gas guzzler for his fleet!

Missing from this quaint tale, which says so much about our lingering cultural biases, are the disastrous economic and environmental consequences of Bob’s eco-suburban scheme. His Sunflower Valley is nothing more than a green version of Levittown, replete with the liberal vision of solar panels and electric cars to redress the sins of the past. But the ugly carbon-footprint implications of this vision cannot be glossed over with technology as so many seem to be hoping—a world of seven billion people living at the density of a city stands a chance, but that same world at the density of Bob’s suburban vision would be crushed by the weight of its own resource demands. In fact, if all seven billion lived at the density of townhouses instead of single-family homes, but nowhere close to the density of big American cities, the entire planet’s population would fit in the state of Texas surrounded by nothing but nature and agriculture.²⁵ I make this point

not to propose we all move to Texas, but rather to illustrate that climate change demands solutions that diminish our carbon footprint en masse, with reductions in land and resource usage on a per capita basis.

This is among the most critical factors in understanding the merits of transit-based hyperdensity at a global level. Societies worldwide are growing wealthier, with the middle-class burgeoning in places including China, India, Brazil, Turkey, Russia, Vietnam, Nigeria, and Lebanon. In his book *The Post-American World*, Fareed Zakaria outlines what he calls the “rise of the rest,” indicating that while global prosperity is a good thing, the resource constraints presented by more than two billion people becoming middle-class are daunting and, most likely, our most pressing international challenge.²⁶ If those two billion souls attempt the same profligate suburban lifestyle so many Americans cherish, even Bob’s “green” version of it, the planet will careen toward disaster.

Beyond the environment, however, Bob's vision for Sunflower Valley is demonstrably less economically productive than denser parts of America. I examine this topic in the first of three chapters that form the initial section of this book, "Why Cities Are Good." These chapters bring together literature that empirically and objectively indicates why cities are performing better than their suburban counterparts in terms of three critically important metrics—the economy, the environment, and public wellness. In section two, "How to Build Good Cities," I propose methods and policies, drawing on public- and private-sector techniques from across the nation, for creating prosperous, sustainable, and joyous urban environments. I have also structured this section in three chapters: on building sound urban development, on constructing the infrastructure to support that development, and on making new urban development affordable and accessible to all.

BOB'S BIG PLAN



The local architect proposes a city.



Bob's nightmare inspires Bob's eco-suburb counterproposal.



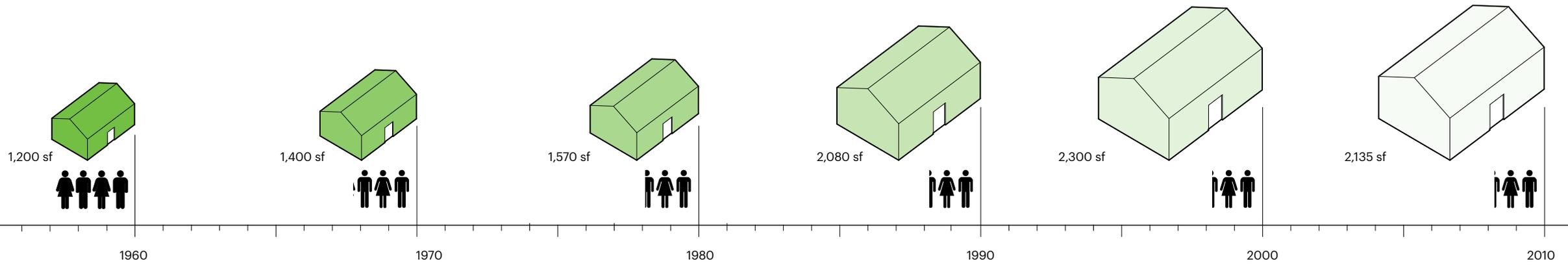
Bob wins a gas guzzler for his eco-suburb proposal!

The conclusion imagines a "Country of Cities," conjuring the implications of a fully realized, truly urban America—a place characterized by cities, small towns, agriculture, nature, and little else—and considers how such a landscape would perform, prosper, and perpetuate itself. In it, I ask the reader to consider that a largely urban country spurred by policy reform, in contrast to our sprawling reality, would unite to become economically stronger, environmentally sounder, internationally safer, physically healthier, socially more fair, experientially more livable, and globally envied and emulated.

This is a polemical vision, a manifesto, put forth with an understanding that the gap between our reality today and a Country of Cities is vast. Even readers who agree with this vision will, for good reason, be skeptical of its likelihood. However, we arrived at our current national landscape not by accident or by pure market forces, but rather by design . . . a poor, inadequate, and anachronistic design that manifested itself within one rapid century and could cease to exist just as rapidly. A remarkable, explicit agenda set suburbanization in motion, and the demands of a new epoch call for a different paradigm that is just as explicit and far-reaching. For the sake of future generations, we must take this new urban path to a more prosperous, more sustainable, and more equitable America and, by extension, create the model for a joyful global lifestyle capable of supporting the 10 billion souls projected to walk this planet at the turn of the next century.

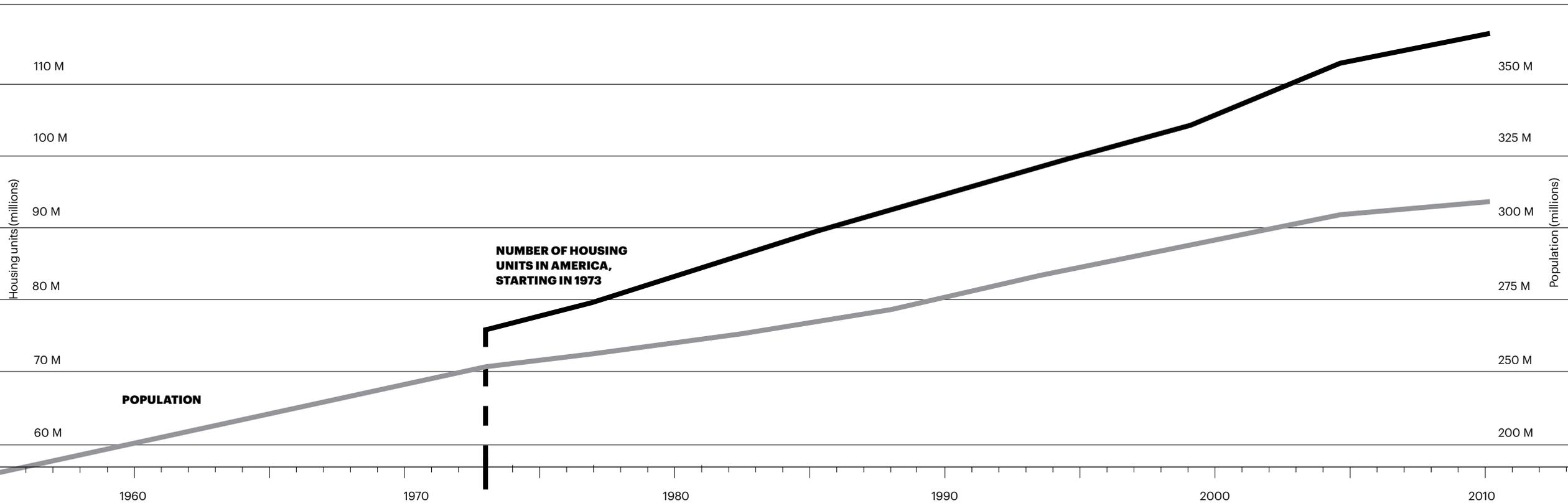
HOUSEHOLD SIZE VS. HOME SIZE

While newly constructed homes have nearly doubled in size since 1960, the total number of people per house has steadily decreased. Larger, more inefficient homes are now occupied by fewer people.



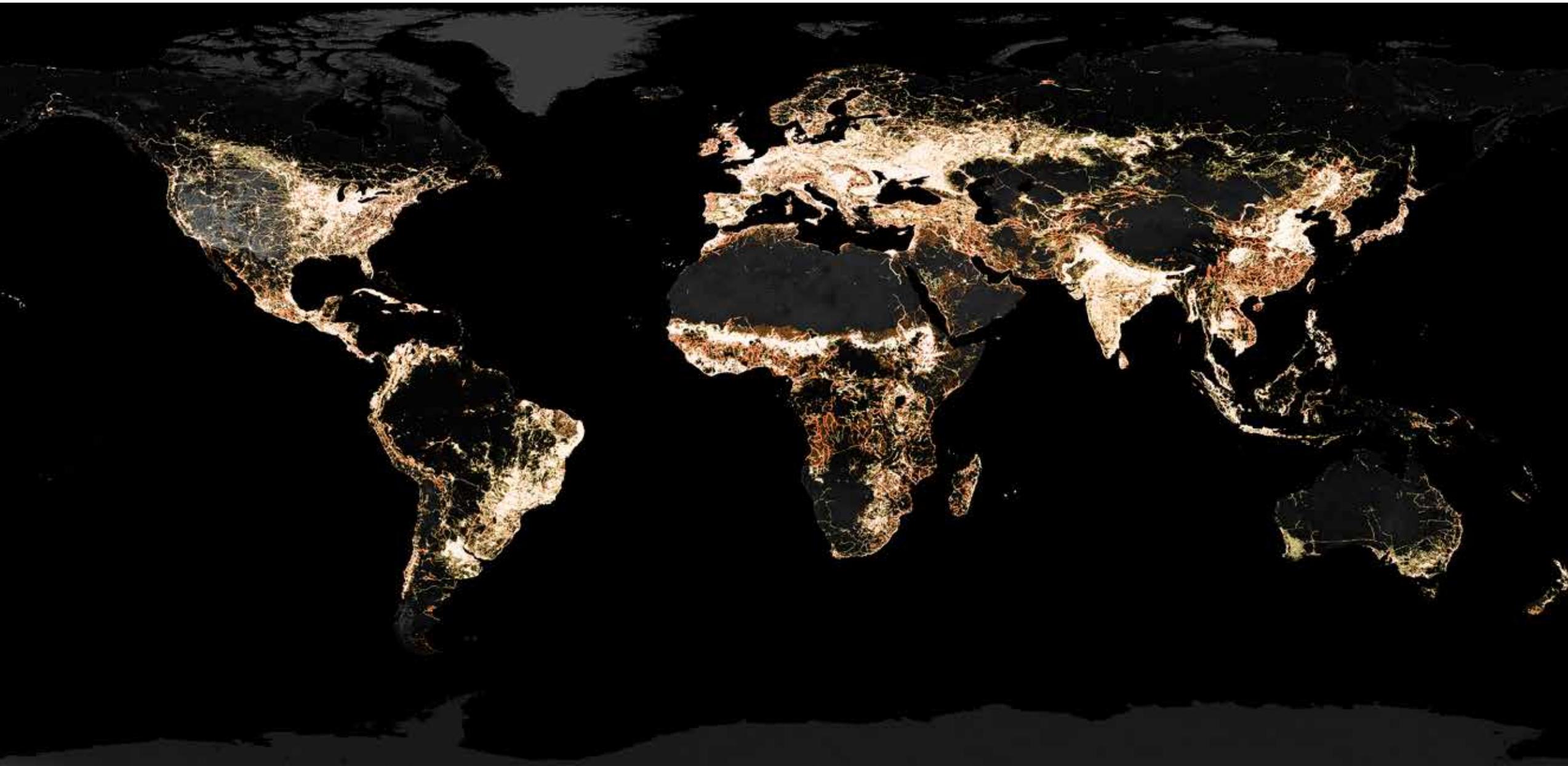
HOUSING STOCK AND POPULATION GROWTH

In the United States, the number of housing units has increased at a greater rate than the population. This means we use more energy, resources, and land to house Americans today.



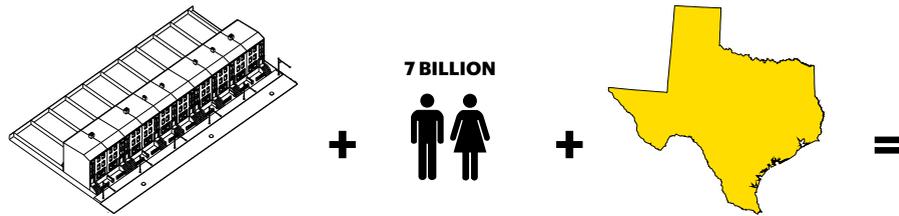
DEVELOPMENT ON PLANET EARTH

Humans directly influence 83% of the earth's land area.



THE WORLD'S POPULATION COULD FIT IN TEXAS

At a density of approximately 25 dwelling units per acre, the entire population of the world could fit in the state of Texas, leaving the remainder of the planet for nature and agriculture. As improbable as this scenario is, it illustrates the vastness of our planet's land area and the power of density to promote more efficient land use.



**WHY
CITIES
ARE
GOOD**

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