

Introduction: Welcome to the Urban Future

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Cain has built a city. For God's Eden, he substitutes his own.

—Jacques Ellul¹

Whatever the future holds for humanity, it is likely to occur mostly in an urban context. A steady stream of migrants from the countryside fills cities from India to Indiana, on every continent, and has made humans primarily an urban species. Cities can be more like Eden or more like Hades, but how they evolve will define our future civilization.

Yet as this book will demonstrate, there are many, and sometimes divergent, urban futures. Indeed, our very definition of a city is fluid. Cities today do not end, like their ancient and medieval counterparts, with the walls surrounding them; they tend to extend far out to the periphery, despite the often-fevered opposition of planners, climate activists, and urban-land interests. The growing role of digital technology expands the boundaries of urbanity even further.

But if the changing nature and form of cities violate the sensibilities of some, the new urbanity, like that of antiquity, will likely remain the epicenter of our economic life, as AEI's Ryan Streeter explores in the initial chapter. But Streeter also points out that cities that adjust to changing conditions thrive, while those that don't adjust fall into obsolescence. The functionality of cities remains, but the lead players constantly change.

Change defines urbanity, often in ways that break with historic tradition. As demographer Wendell Cox points out, the city has been spreading out for millennia, and virtually all growth today, in every part of the world, tends to be on the periphery. This was occurring well before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the outward movement appears to have accelerated and, with the rise of remote work, seems likely to continue for the near future.

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Attitudes are crucial as well. AEI's Samuel J. Abrams finds that Americans, including younger ones, are far more amenable to suburban and exurban living than previously imagined. Factors such as schools, concerns over public safety, and the ability to work at home all drive people to the periphery. Traditional urbanity will likely hold its appeal to young ambitious people—but for a diminished period.

These trends reflect only one aspect of the urban future: that of the wealthy countries of the West. But the future of urbanity is increasingly being shaped in Africa, Asia, and throughout the developing world. The key player here, as in almost everything, is China, and its urban growth has come at an enormous price, particularly for its vast rural population. University of Leeds scholar Li Sun describes the massive migration of workers from China's largely impoverished hinterlands into the cities; the workers' ramshackle settlements contrast sharply with the cities' sleek modernity.

More challenging still may be the fate of cities in poorer countries that lack China's economic and political infrastructure. As South Africans Bheki Mahlobo and Hügo Krüger demonstrate, fast-growing urban areas such as Johannesburg, South Africa, and Lagos, Nigeria, face enormous challenges providing basic security, water, and electricity to their swelling populations. These urban regions are experiencing the consequences—crime, political unrest, and interethnic tensions—that come from increasingly bifurcated cities.

Urban class conflict, however, is not limited to the developing world. Throughout the Western world, deindustrialization has left a bitter legacy of devastated towns such as Youngstown, Ohio, as portrayed by Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo, who have spent many years there. They explore how local residents have tried, often with limited success, to reinvent a place that was once emblematic of America's industrial prowess. They also show the increasing limits of place-based revitalization efforts.

As the traditional working class has been abandoned, the personal services sector has expanded, creating a vast population of working poor in many cities, including the most expensive locales. These groups suffered most during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly from the lockdowns, as many businesses were forced to shut down, sometimes for prolonged periods.² In his chapter, Michael Lind suggests cities need to develop policies that allow these workers to advance in their lives, receiving adequate pay

and benefits. Cities cannot thrive if so many of their residents remain marginalized. Urban enthusiasts both left and right need to focus primarily on class, not on racial grievance, obsessions with transit, or the promotion of even greater density. These issues may appeal to the self-righteous, but they have little positive effect on the ground.

The good news, as Lind suggests, is that there may be solutions to these and other pressing urban issues. Some of this promise can be seen in suburbs and smaller cities that are now widening their appeal to millennials, immigrants, and ethnic minorities. They are the homes of the next middle class. As Southern Methodist University's J. H. Cullum Clark points out, metropolitan areas such as Dallas–Fort Worth, Texas, and many other cities in the “Texas Triangle” are providing opportunities for not only their own natives but a rising number of migrants from the rest of the country and across the world.

These rising cities are expanding, for the most part, outward. The shift to the periphery, whether in Dallas or outside Los Angeles, is unmistakable and increasingly diverse in nature. As Celia López del Río and Karla López del Río write, places such as California's Inland Empire, east of Los Angeles, have been transformed from a largely white enclave into a highly diverse place. In cities such as Riverside, California, we can see the emergence of a nascent, dynamic urban economy, which can provide opportunities for the new generation that are no longer easily achievable closer to the historic center.

There are also promising signs in the Midwest. If older industrial cities like Youngstown struggle, some places with less of an old manufacturing legacy, such as Indianapolis, Indiana, have thrived, as Indiana native Aaron M. Renn suggests. No longer “India-no-place,” the Hoosier metropolis faces many challenges, such as crime, but has continued to attract new residents and businesses in the past few decades. This is part of a nascent midwestern revival that has spread to places such as Columbus and Cincinnati in Ohio and Des Moines, Iowa.

Of course, urban success will require a new approach to issues, whether in a big or small city. Salt Lake City, Utah, notes University of Utah's Natalie Gochnour, has tapped its strong religious and civic legacy from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to find innovative solutions to problems of homelessness, substance abuse, and health care.

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Rather than a backwater and distinct cultural outlier, Salt Lake City now stands as one of the nation's rising cities and may act as a role model for other urban centers.

Yet there cannot be an urban solution if our bigger urban regions cannot expand opportunities for affordable and desired housing. There has been some progress. Even California, note AEI Housing Center's Edward J. Pinto and Tobias Peter, has begun to explore policies to reduce the crippling shortage of affordable housing that has turned our wealthiest state in terms of producing billionaires into one with the highest levels of poverty and overcrowding and placed it among the lowest levels of homeownership.

Perhaps the biggest short-range threat to American cities, even more than housing issues, has been an unwelcome resurgence in crime. Fortunately, in leading cities such as Houston and New York, there is a widespread pushback against lax law enforcement. Crucially, notes Charles Blain, CEO of the Houston-based Urban Reform Institute, the push for stronger but also more responsive policies is coming primarily from minorities in cities; the call for defunding the police, he points out, stems largely from wealthier white progressives. To produce a better policy environment, Blain suggests, urban minorities need to make the two parties compete for their allegiance.

Ultimately, no urban revival will be likely if our greatest city, New York, cannot find a way out of its current economic slide and growing lawlessness. Fortunately, notes *New York Daily News* columnist Harry Siegel, the election of Brooklyn's Eric Adams as mayor represents an opportunity to restore order in the streets and rekindle Gotham's economic appeal. The road, he notes, may be bumpy, but at least the city may no longer be racing down the wrong one.

The last chapter addresses the urban future. One crucial issue for cities in the next few decades lies in meeting environmental challenges. In his chapter, Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Alan M. Berger lays out a scenario for building low-emission—but comfortable—new cities, particularly on the urban frontier. This new conception of cities, emphasizing renewables, home-based work, and autonomous vehicles, is a stunning new vision of how we can develop urban areas to benefit the planetary ecosystem.

Yet technology cannot guarantee urbanity's brighter future. To thrive, cities need to recover their historic roles as places of aspiration, not just for the rich and credentialed but for the middle and working classes. We need to focus far less on urban form and a return to legacy structures and more on how those who live in cities experience them. It is only by making cities—including their suburbs and exurbs—more human that we can create a better, more equitable urban future. Whether we live in sprawling suburbs or dense urban cores, we define humanity. "The citizen," observed Frank Lloyd Wright, "is really the city. The city is going wherever he goes."³

Notes

1. Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), 5.
2. Larry Elliott and Patrick Collinson, "New Lockdown, Same Economic Victims: Young, Low-Paid Workers," *Guardian*, November 3, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/nov/03/new-lockdown-same-economic-victims-young-low-paid-workers>.
3. Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Living City* (New York: New American Library, 1958), 86.