

Urbanization of the United States of America

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1. Increase of Urban Population

(a) Changes in urban population ratio

The United States is one of the most urbanized countries in the world. As of 1910, the urban population ratio was yet to reach the 50% threshold, but in 1970, it was around 3/4 (Tab. 1).

Table 1. Urban Population Ratio of the United States

	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970
Urban pop.	41,999	54,158	68,955	74,424	96,468	125,269	149,325
Rural pop.	49,973	51,553	53,820	57,246	54,230	54,054	53,887
%	45.7	51.2	56.2	56.5	64.0	69.9	73.5
%	54.3	48.8	43.8	43.5	36.0	30.1	26.5

NB. Urban population: no. of residents living in cities (2,500 persons or more) until 1940, and after 1950, no. of residents living in any administrative areas with a population of 2,500 or more.

It is necessary to note that the definition of "urban" in the US census varies from what is used in the Japanese statistics. In the US, the lowest limit of population defining "city" is 2,500, whereas in Japan, it is 30,000. However, American cities with a population of 2,500 are always urban both in townscape and function. In occupation also, American cities are very urban, since 95.7% of the employed population fall in either secondary or tertiary industries (1972). In other words, more than 200 million people in the US are urban in the broad sense.

(b) Presence of many metropolises and super-metropolises

The US is well characterized by its having many giant cities today. As of 1970, there were 32 Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSAs) with a population of 1 million or more. This fact makes a sharp contrast to the number of cities with 1 million population or more, since only 6 cities had more than 1 million in 1970 (Tab. 2).

Table 2. Giant Metropolises of the United States (1970)

City	Urban Pop.	SMSA Pop.	City	Urban Pop.	SMSA Pop.
New York	7,895,563	11,571,899	Philadelphia	1,949,996	4,817,914
Los Angeles	2,809,813	7,032,075	Detroit	1,513,601	4,199,931
Chicago	3,369,357	6,978,947	Houston	1,232,802	1,985,031

Considering that administrative merge is not so common as in Japan, it should be noted that the statistics on SMSAs can be used for counting the number of million cities in place of administrative cities. A detailed consideration will reveal that Greater New York includes the Newark SMSA and others, making a total of some 16 million population, and Greater Los Angeles with slightly over 10 million and Greater Chicago nearly 10 million.

2. Urbanization and Natural Environment

(a) Climatic environment

A global view reveals that the US contains practically all different climatic types within its territories primarily due to its continent-size. In this respect, even Japan which is frequently explained by its N-S climatic differences seems quite homogeneous. Among the many countries (excluding colonies) in the world, the US is probably the only country where the citizens could, if they so wish, enjoy every different type of climate without going abroad. This opportunity is used

by them to a degree that no-one can deny. A good example is explicitly to be seen in various parts of tropical or subtropical American lands. Especially for the Americans whose ancestry came from Europe north of the Alps, such tropical or subtropical atmosphere has long been so attractive that they would like to live even for a short period. At the present moment, for many of the white Americans, especially those living in the cities of the North, such southerly located states as Florida, New Mexico, Arizona, California and Hawaii, and probably Texas too, are very attractive. By contrast, the black Americans having lived in the South still have a tendency to move to the cities in the North, where climate is much more similar to what is found in Europe north of the Alps.

(b) Topographical environment

For the Japanese, the following three items should be considered when urbanization in America is treated in connection with topographical environment. 1) Ample flat lands, 2) inland location of cities, and 3) high-altitude location of cities.

As well known, the US is a continent-sized country, in which much of the lands are either flat or gently rolling, causing no serious obstacles to urbanization. American suburbia requires a very large amount of land because of its spacious horizontal expansion. Automobile Age started around the turn of the century and was much accelerated in the 1920s and again after WW II, having shaped the American suburban scene to a great degree. In the history of human civilization, the US of today may be characterized as a nation where the maximum use of land is used by urban people on a per-capita basis. And this has been partly made possible by the existence of immense flat lands without question. Of late average land lot sold around great metropolises in the US except New York City is around 700 m², and needless to say, roads, parks, and shopping centers are normally of a very large size by Japanese standards.

Many of the American cities are located inland; rather we should say that most of them are far from the sea coasts. It is very much true for the Japanese that they have no direct relation to the sea coasts and their citizens live a daily life without feeling that they live close to the sea. The Mississippi watershed or the Central Plains of North America are good examples. By contrast, no places in Japan cannot escape from the topographical immenseness which hides mountains from visibility or beyond horizon. Such a flat, gently rolling land of America is dotted with many cities and towns, and all of the major ones are connected by inland water courses (rivers, lakes, and canals), making a sharp contrast with Japanese ones which only rarely use inland waterways for navigation.

Some parts of the American flat or gently rolling lands are considerably high in altitude. In Japan, there are no cities (shi) whose central urban area is located at an altitude of 1000m or more; the highest being Fuji-Yoshiba, Chino, Suwa and Okaya located at about 800 m. In the US, however, there are many cities and towns located high up. Denver, Colo., with a metropolitan population of 1.2 million is located in the Great Plains at an elevation of around 1,600m, although its latitude is nearly 40 degrees N. Santa Fe, N. M., is 2,100m high.

3. Urbanization of Rural Areas

Urbanization is a nationwide problem in the US. Practically all the farms and hamlets are under the direct influence of great urbanization today. For a majority of American farmers, their home life is not so different from what is held by many city dwellers. If one looks into their living home, he might be able to get an idea that the rural-urban dichotomy is not so sharp as far as the way of living is concerned.

In general, the American farmers do not stick to their lands too much; rather it seems that they deem the land as an object for speculation. In the past half century, the average size of farms has more than doubled; 147 acres in 1920, 213 acres in 1950, 383 acres in 1970 and 394 acres in 1972. The increment was largely made possible by purchasing the lands of farmers who



① World Trade Center Towers, Manhattan (1975)



③ A historical townscape, Old Salem, North Carolina (1975)



④ Mall of Richmond, Indiana (1975)



② Suburban residences, Garden City, New York (1975)



⑤ A street near a subway station, Jamaica, New York (1975)

stopped operating. Possibility of getting the land for urban purposes is also great. Factories, airports, universities, research institutes and new towns are generally very large in area, and a result is a relatively low density of population and structures per unit area. A great many suburban homes are scattered, as if they are distributed in accordance with the dispersed farmsteads laid out in the framework of Township System. Not a few cases show that the abandoned farmhouses were remodelled into suburban homes or are used without much modification. Some urban people seem to like to live in a rural environment.

4. Megalopolis

(a) Formation of the American Megalopolis

Megalopolitanization is a well known contemporary phenomenon in America today. After Jean Gottmann advocated this new spatial phenomenon in 1957, the American Megalopolis or the Mid-Atlantic Coast Megalopolis became so famous throughout the world. The American Megalopolis is centered on New York City with several major metropolises such as Boston to the north, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington, D. C. to the south. Many other medium-sized and small cities are located all over this great urban belt stretching some 700 or 800 km. The total population is nearly 40 million. This megalopolis comprises the economic, political and educational center of the US today; New York being by far the outstanding economic center, Washington, D. C. being the seat of the Federal Government, and Boston, although some might argue, being the educational center by having many renowned universities. All the Federal capitals in American history have been found within the limits of American Megalopolis.

Not only in the Mid-Atlantic Coast Region but also in a few other regions in the US, megalopolitanization can be seen. The Southern Great Lakes Region and Southern California are good examples. The former contains such important cities as Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Indianapolis. Population altogether accounts for well over 20 million. The latter case is a newer one; with Los Angeles and San Francisco, it structures a bi-nuclear pattern. And the population is coming to reach the threshold of 20 million.

(b) High-rise buildings

Construction of skyscrapers started in the late 19th century, and it reached the perwar peak in 1931 with completing the Empire State Building in Manhattan of New York City. After the last war, the skyscraping once saw a dismissed scene, overcasted largely by the construction of very flat but horizontally large buildings. However, it seems that the high-rise buildings regained its popularity. Of late, Chicago boasts the world's tallest building: the Sears Building, 110 stories, 1454 feet tall. New York City is about to see the final completion of the World Trade Center Towers (110 stories). New York City has 87 buildings of 500 feet or taller as of January 1974, including those under construction. 31 other cities including Chicago have such tall buildings too. Many medium-sized or small cities have 20 or 30 storied buildings, symbolizing the American townscape. This American "invention" has been diffused over the world although to a varying degree.

(b) Horizontal expansion

Horizontal expansion is also an outstanding phenomenon in America. If one sees downtowns only when he visits American cities, he might have an image that the American city is solely consisted of high-rise buildings. But a great majority of urban Americans live in smaller structures or single homes. Accelerated by the increasing use of automobiles and also by the relatively easy acquisition of lands for housing, the horizontal expansion is very large. Today no countries in the world can compete with the US in this respect.

5. Environment of the American City

(a) Ethnic and housing problems

Deterioration of old houses in and around downtown areas is quite grave in most of the

large cities. A considerable number of apartment houses and town houses were first constructed in the 19th century and they now need repairs or reconstruction. To meet this situation, urban renewal projects are to be seen practically in every city. Especially serious are the great cities such as New York or Chicago where hundreds of old buildings just need immediate repair or reconstruction works. Some of the buildings are so much deteriorated that one may feel as if he is travelling in a war-damaged city.

Unlike Japan, the housing problems in the US are very often entangled with complicated ethnic problems. There is an undeniable trend that each ethnic group is apt to form its own ethnic quarter, often in the form of ghetto. This is especially conspicuous among blacks, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and foreign borns. Among the so-called whites, however, mixing is increasingly becoming a universal phenomenon in close accordance with the mixing of blood. Although quite slow, mixing of blood and residence among different ethnic groups is advancing in the US through the efforts of the Federal Government, local governments and individual citizens.

(b) Traffic problems

At the present moment, the use of automobiles and trucks is obliged to be made throughout the vast US. Several large metropolises such as New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D. C., Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco have a subway or other intraurban or suburban railroad systems but this fact cannot overwhelm the thorough use of motor vehicles in this country. To a Japanese visiting Los Angeles or Detroit which are quite large both in population and area, it is a very astonishing event that he cannot find any commuter trains in the Japanese sense. Even the interurban train services are almost insignificant, perhaps with the only exception of Metroliners between New York City and Washington, D. C. An incipient stage of computer-oriented trains and buses is to be seen at some places. It is quite a widespread phenomenon to see downtown malls with fancy shops and trees and flowers. In other words, many main streets are now void of passenger traffic especially during daytime. Aviation is another very important means of transportation in the US. Practically all major urban centers are linked with each other by air routes and even the smaller ones have small airports primarily for private airplanes. In the US, one needs to travel a relatively long distance as compared with Japan, and this fact inevitably leads to the need of using many airplanes consuming much energy and causing noise.

(c) Pollution problems

All sorts of environmental pollutions are the topics of the citizens today. There seems to be a kind of consensus among the many that there should be some standards for measuring the degree of pollution, but in actuality, there is a tendency to renew or alter standards established by law frequently. And that, the much debated pollution problems are yet to be solved sufficiently in general. As elsewhere in most of the highly developed countries in the world, the black smog has been wiped off to a considerable degree, but the photochemical smog still is a problem in such cities as Los Angeles. Noise is another serious problem especially for the citizens living near arterial highways and airports. To meet this, construction control and removal of houses are practiced. At many places, water is quite polluted by industrial and domestic wastes. This is especially serious in the case of inland waters. The case of Lake Erie has been much debated and the situation was worsened because it is an international lake facing Canada. Many criticize the cutting down of forests and the landfills for urbanization, since they worry about the deterioration of natural beauty.

In sum, the US is making efforts to soften the impact of hazardous environmental pollutions. It may not be too exaggerated to say that the so-called environmental pollution is not so serious as in Japan, largely because of the much lower density of population and establishments affected by pollutants.