

The City We All Want to Live In

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Film still from *The New Metropolis*.

The first American metropolises emerged after World War II, the result of a publicly subsidized mass exodus of white populations that coincided with the migration of blacks from the cotton and sugar fields of the American South to the cities of the North and West. Over the years, segregation in housing and in education increased, and today the nation's public schools are more segregated than they were decades ago.

Beginning just two years after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision declared segregated schools illegal, the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act, combined with earlier federal housing policies, encouraged the flight of whites from the nation's cities to the suburbs. These public investments in highway construction, combined with racially restrictive mortgage-lending programs and redlining of black and integrated neighborhoods, created racially exclusive communities. Since then, poverty has increased and become more concentrated in many of the nation's cities, older suburbs, and rural places.

Now, climate change presents an opportunity to make over our communities in terms of land use, transportation, and racial and social justice. In the 45 years since the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the environmental and environmental justice movements have become part of the national consciousness. Concerns such as pollution, destruction of habitat, long commutes, rising energy costs, and global warming stem from the runaway patterns of sprawl and metropolitan development. Beginning in the 1990s, profound inequities emerged between older and newer suburban communities as development of farmland—requiring new infrastructure and shopping facilities—drew populations toward the metropolitan fringe.

A recent Urban Land Institute report points out that the United States has little chance to reduce CO₂ production without changes in current development and transportation patterns. By shifting away from suburban sprawl toward more compact, mixed-use development, people would drive less, thus cutting down greenhouse-gas emissions. The authors calculate that shifting 60 percent of new growth to compact patterns would save 79 million tons of CO₂ annually by 2030.

There is a risk, however, that such policies may resegregate our metropolitan regions in new ways. The high-speed

rail and pedestrian communities so attractive to upper-income people may drain transportation resources from lower-income communities and drive up the value of land, making affordable housing hard to find. Land-use changes already underway threaten to transform American metropolitan regions into a pattern typical of developing countries: The rich live in the core cities, while the poor live on the periphery.

Signs of a New American Identity



Intentional Integration in Pennsauken Township, N.J.

It is time to address spatial apartheid in the United States. Society shapes its cities, and our cities in turn shape us. But when it comes to making decisions about the shape of our cities, communities of color historically have not participated in proportion to their numbers. Such decisions are routinely made by society's most powerful—businesses, upper-income families, and elected officials—who lack the consciousness and incentive to consider the impact of their decisions on vulnerable populations.

But if African Americans and other communities of color participate in the planning process, society could overcome the legacy of racism, and healthy, socially just, multiracial communities could flourish. All residents should have access to good jobs, real transportation choices, safe and stable housing, a good education, a range of parks and natural areas, vibrant public spaces, and healthful, regionally produced foods. The benefits and burdens of growth and change should be equitably shared. All residents and communities should have the opportunity to be involved as full and equal partners in public decision making.



Carl Anthony wrote this article for **America: The Remix**, the Spring 2010 issue of YES! Magazine. Carl, founder of Breakthrough Communities, was acting director of the Ford Foundation's worldwide programs on the environment and community development. He founded San Francisco's Urban Habitat Program and the *Race, Poverty, and Environment Journal*.

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