

The Social Geography of the North American City, 1900–40

A Research Note and Appeal for Evidence

Richard Harris

Volume 17, Number 3, February 1989

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017635ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017635ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this note

Harris, R. (1989). The Social Geography of the North American City, 1900–40: A Research Note and Appeal for Evidence. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 17(3), 211–212. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017635ar>

The Social Geography of the North American City, 1900-40: A Research Note and Appeal for Evidence

Richard Harris

Most observers of the North American city have agreed with E. W. Burgess that in the first part of this century only the middle classes could afford to live in the suburbs.¹ Such a view has been perpetuated by those, such as S. B. Warner and Robert Fishman, who have concentrated on middle-class suburbs.² Of course there have been dissenters. Among their contemporaries, both Graham Taylor and Harlan Douglass emphasized the extent to which working-class settlement in the suburbs had progressed by the second and third decades of this century.³ Homer Hoyt made a similar point in his study of residential neighbourhoods in American cities.⁴ More recently, Paul-André Linteau's work on Maisonneuve has documented with great care the development in this period of a working-class suburb of Montreal.⁵ But, in surprisingly unmodified form, Burgess's view still prevails in many texts and historical surveys. Ken Jackson's recent, and in many ways definitive, account of the process of suburban growth in the United States is a case in point.⁶

I believe that in the period 1900-40, it is misleading to associate the inner city with the working class and the suburbs with the middle and upper classes. Although there were middle-class suburbs together with slum and tenement districts for the working poor located close to the centre, there were also inner-city enclaves of the affluent as well as industrial suburbs for blue-collar workers and their families. The social geography of the North American city cannot fairly be summarized, or even approximated, by the sort of model that Burgess and his followers have offered.

Currently, I am engaged in a research project that seeks to support this new interpretation of the early twentieth century city.⁷ Focusing upon the major cities of New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles (together with smaller centres including Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver) I am gathering secondary materials that

describe the patterns of settlement of the various social classes. These services include studies, social surveys, theses, and planning reports. I have also begun a quantitative analysis of primary sources in Toronto and Montreal and plan to extend this type of analysis to other cities. My research has already yielded strong evidence that working-class settlement in the suburbs was common. In Toronto around the time of World War I, for example, assessment data show that the suburbs contained a higher proportion of working-class families than the city itself. However, many gaps remain and I would welcome suggestions from scholars, researchers, and archivists as to sources that might yield relevant evidence for specific cities.

If many suburbs were working class, how could this have been so? Most workers in the early twentieth century were concerned with bare survival. How could they afford to buy new homes in suburban subdivisions and commute to work? In most cases suburban workers neither bought new homes nor commuted (at least by transit) to work. Instead, many have built their own home and then walked to work. By building their own home, they would have been able to substitute sweat-equity for limited monetary resources, and they might have been able to walk to work because, even by World War I, many factories had moved out to the suburban fringe along the railway lines. Qualitative and circumstantial evidence can be used to support these arguments, but there is little in the way of secondary research and hard data.⁸ The processes of self-building and industrial decentralization have received little scholarly attention. Once again, I would welcome suggestions about evidence that I should consult.

For some, the question of where different classes lived within the city, and of how they came to live there, has intrinsic interest. But there is more at stake than that. Where people live is bound up with larger questions of standard of living and ways of life. For

example, if many workers did live in the suburbs, then it is likely that their standard of living was higher than has commonly been supposed. It is not just a question of using suburban residence as an *indicator* of living conditions. A suburban home, if owner-occupied, might actually make possible a higher standard of living, most notably by creating opportunities for the investment of sweat-equity (self-building being the extreme case). In this manner, a re-examination of the social geography of the city in the period 1900-40 can offer new insights into the nature of work and hence the nature of urban society in this period.

I hope eventually to be able to support these large claims. For the present I would welcome views and suggestions concerning both the historical evidence and the proposed interpretation that I have outlined.

Notes

- ¹ E. W. Burgess, "The Growth of the City," in *The City*, ed. by R. E. Park, E. W. Burgess, and R. MacKenzie (Chicago, 1926).
- ² S. B. Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962); Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias* (New York, Basic books, 1987).
- ³ Graham Taylor, *Satellite Cities: A Study of Industrial Suburbs* (New York, 1915); Harlan Douglass, *The Suburban Trend* (New York, 1925).
- ⁴ Homer Hoyt, *The Structure and Growth of Residential Neighbourhoods in American Cities* (Washington, 1939).
- ⁵ Paul-André Linteau, *The Promoters' City: Building the Industrial Town of Maisonneuve, 1883-1918* (Toronto, 1981).
- ⁶ K. T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanisation of the United States* (New York, 1985).

Appeal for Evidence

- ⁷ I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for providing a Canada Research Fellowship in partial support of this research.
- ⁸ For a synthesis of the available evidence for Toronto see Richard Harris "The Growth of Home Ownership in Toronto, 1899-1913" (Research Paper no. 163, University of Toronto, July, 1987) Centre for Urban and Community Studies. The general argument is developed in Richard Harris, "American Suburbs: A Sketch of a New Interpretation," *Journal of Urban History*, 15 (1988): 98-103.