

Exam 1 – Introduction to Urban Studies

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“I pledge my honor that I have abided by the Stevens Honor System.”

Urban life is the standard for more than half of people in the United States in the modern day. Accessibility, economic opportunity, teeming social environments, and diverse cultural areas attract and keep many people within city borders for their entire lives, or at least part of them. Cities are so exciting to most, that people will travel from other countries just to visit and tour the urban areas America has to offer. However, for most of its history, a *large* majority of Americans lived in rural areas, because agriculture was the dominant industry. The urbanization that we see today is a byproduct of capitalism at work, with the explosive growth in the last century largely attributable to the industrial revolution and its great effect on the country's economy. Even today, trends in the free market of the American economy have a profound impact and continue to shape urban life as we know it.

Prior to the industrial revolution, especially during the colonial era, cities were still centers for trade and culture, but on a much smaller scale, and with far fewer amenities than what city-goers today have access too. Cities were mostly dense gatherings of one to two story buildings built around a port to the ocean or a river, which provided ample transport for importing manufactured goods from overseas, and exporting the many natural resources required for production which were available in the colonies. That economic opportunity attracted merchants, fur hunters, and many more hoping for a slice of the pie. Roads were mostly dirt or gravel, and due to being built on an as-needed basis, were scattered about with little planning, organization, or forethought. After all, with no cars, there was little need for hard-surfaced roads.

Public transportation was nonexistent, and ultimately unnecessary at the time, as the cities were usually small enough that everything was within walking distance. The only storefronts or places of manufacturing were small, individually owned shops operated by artisans with specialized skills: bakers, cobblers, tailors, blacksmiths, and such. There was still an economic gap between some of the citizens, but the lack of mass-scale production and mega-corporations meant people were on a little more even playing field. There were many diverse cultures within cities, thanks to the immigrants from many other countries attracted to the areas by economic opportunity, but they tended to congregate by ethnic backgrounds and the concept of a “melting pot” and cultural mixing was not yet realized.

Fast-forward to urban areas during and following the industrial revolution. Thanks to sturdy new materials like steel and concrete, buildings began to expand upwards, adding more and more stories as time passed. Roads began being paved with cobblestone and eventually asphalt, as many families now owned automobiles which required hard-topped surfaces. Roadways were planned in advance, with strict building codes and statutes that ensured an organized and consistent look to city streets. The economic boom attracted inspired young professionals to the city, hoping to make it big on Wall Street or climb the corporate ladder at one of the many companies now headquartered in the city. With cars providing reasonable means of transport for long distances, an increasing demand for housing, and a natural limit on vertical expansion, “urban crawl” took off and suburbs/edge cities started popping up in surrounding areas, like Hoboken, Jersey City, and Newark. As those cities grew, cars congested the roads too much, and public transportation was born. Buses, trains, and subways were now how most Americans got to work daily. With mass-scale production in full swing, more storefronts became recognizable brand names like Starbucks and CVS. These mega-corporations provided absurd

profits to the executives at the company headquarters, while paying barely livable wages to their employees to maximize their margins. This drove a much bigger divide between the working class and the upper class, increasing the wealth gap to a much larger scale. Cultural diversity was immense, with more and more immigrants moving in, and beginning to socialize outside of their cultural bounds. Couples from different backgrounds settled down together and had kids, mixing their two cultures and raising diverse and well-rounded new generations.

Overall, the explosive economic growth that came along with the industrial revolution completely changed the concept of cities, and what life was like for the people living within them. Post-capitalist cities grew in scale and complexity, and now harbor more people than the rest of the rural area combined. Thanks to advances in building technology, transport, and manufacturing, cities evolved into how we see them today. And as the market continues to shift and expand, cities will continue to change to reflect that.