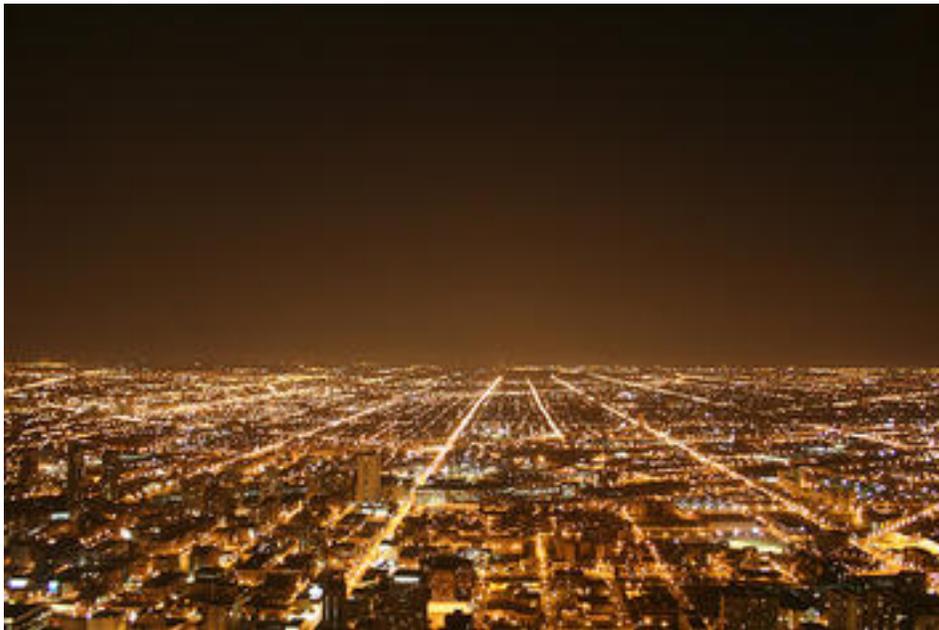




The Ambiguous Triumph of the “Urban Age”

by [Robert Bruegmann](#) 09/13/2011



In its State of the Population report in 2007, the United Nations Population Fund made this ringing declaration: “In 2008, the world reaches an invisible but momentous milestone: For the first time in history, more than half its human population, 3.3 billion people, will be living in urban areas.”

The agency’s voice was one of many trumpeting an epoch-making event. For the last several years, newspaper and magazine articles, television shows and scholarly papers have explored the premise that because most of the world now lives in urban rather than in rural areas things are going to be, or at least should be, different. Often the conclusion is that cities may finally get the attention they deserve from policy makers and governments. This optimism dovetails nicely with a sizeable literature of urban advocacy

chronicling the rejuvenation of central cities and extolling the supposed virtues of high-density city living, even predicting the withering away of the suburbs.

This supposed triumph of the urban is fraught with ironies, however. The first is that, rather than a simple rush of people from the hinterlands into the centers of high density cities, there has also been, within almost every urban area in the world, a significant move of the population outward, from dense city centers into peripheral suburban areas and beyond them into very low-density exurban regions.

We can use Paris as a typical example. The city of Paris reached its peak population of nearly 3 million in the 1920s. It has lost nearly a third of its population since then. What remains in the city is a smaller and wealthier population. At the same time the suburbs, accommodating both families of modest income forced out of the city as well as a burgeoning middle class, have grown enormously, from two million to over eight million. And this does not count a great deal of essentially urban population that lives in a vast ring of exurban or “peri-urban” settlement. Certainly the majority of “urban” dwellers in the Paris region do not live in the elegant apartment blocks along the great boulevards familiar to the tourist. They live in houses or small apartment buildings in the suburbs and use the automobile for their daily transportation needs.

In fact, Paris is a good example of an even more fundamental irony. At the very moment when urban population has been reported to surpass the rural, this distinction has lost most of its significance, at least in many parts of the affluent world. Two hundred years ago, before automobiles, telephones, the internet and express package services, cities were much more compact and rural life was indeed very different from urban life. Most inhabitants of rural areas were tied to agriculture or industries devoted to the extraction of natural resources. Their lives were fundamentally different from those of urban dwellers. Today the situation has changed radically. Most people living in areas classified as rural don't farm or have any direct connection with agriculture. They hold jobs similar to those in urban areas. And although they might not have opera houses, upscale boutiques or specialized hospitals nearby, the activities that take place in these venues are available to them in ways that they never were before.

I can confirm the way the distinction between urban and rural has broken down by looking out the window of the house in Omro, WI where I am staying this weekend.

Omro, population about 3000, is located 8 miles west of Oshkosh and is legally a city under Wisconsin law. It is also an “urban” place according to the Census Bureau which, like those of other countries, defines urban largely by density standards. In the case of the US, this means, in simplest terms, a density of at least 1000 people per square mile or just under two people per acre.

At one time this 1000-people-per-square-mile figure did provide a logical demarcation line. Above those densities were places that could afford urban services like public water and sewers, sidewalks, streetlights, municipal fire departments and libraries. Below that level were places that either didn't have these services or had to depend on faraway county governments. Unless you were closely associated with agricultural production or other rural economic activities or you were wealthy enough to provide your own services, it was quite inconvenient to live in rural areas.

Today, the automobile, rural electrification, the internet and the rise of alternate and privatized services has transformed what it means to live in rural areas. “Country living” today has few of the drawbacks that made it inconvenient for middle class residents as

recently as fifty years ago, and the migration of so many urbanites into the country has blurred the distinction between urban and rural.

The view out my window bears this out. When I look one direction what I see are city streets and houses on land that is technically urban. Of course, Omro, with a single main street, two traffic lights and only a handful of stores, is not at all the kind of place that most people associate with the words “city” or “urban.” Like the majority of small urban places in this country, its densities are lower than those found in the suburbs of larger cities. When I look out the other direction I see mostly fields beyond the city limit. But, unlike the case in the past, there is no sharp divide. There has been a significant increase in the number of houses out in the area that is technically “rural.” Some of these used to be farmhouses, but there are few farmers anywhere for miles around. Most farming is now done under contract or as a large industrial-scale operation.

Most of the houses in the “rural” area around Omro have been built in the last decade or two and never housed anyone with any direct connection to farming. They are suburban in appearance and mostly inhabited by people who work at home, are retired or commute some distance to jobs spread across a vast swath of urban territory that stretches from Fond du Lac south of Lake Winnebago to Green Bay where the Fox River meets Lake Michigan.

The result is that today, as you drive outward from the center of Fond du Lac, Oshkosh, Appleton or Green Bay, the number of houses per square mile diminishes, but there is no clear break between city and country. It is a crazy quilt of agricultural, residential and other uses. Commuting patterns, if charted on a map, would form a giant matrix of lines running in all directions. Whether one is in the center of Oshkosh or 50 miles away, however, one can still live an essentially urban existence.

This same diffused urban condition holds true for very large swaths of the United States wherever there is enough underground water to allow wells. It is particularly conspicuous in the older and more densely settled eastern part of the country. A state like New Jersey exhibits a pattern of dense older cities, radiating suburbs, vast exurban territories and farmland and open space, overlapping in ways that confound traditional notions about what is urban and rural. In places like New Jersey, the census distinction has lost almost all of its meaning.

I don't mean to suggest that the news that the majority of the world's population is now urban has no significance. In fact this move from the countryside to urban areas has been one of the defining events of world history over the last several centuries. Although this process was mostly finished in Western Europe and the United States decades ago, it still continues in most of Latin America, Africa and Asia and accounts for a great deal of the dramatic upward surge in income throughout the world.

Nor am I suggesting the demise of the great cities of Europe or America. Far from it. Many rich families in particular will probably continue to choose high-density neighborhoods like those on the Upper East Side of New York or the 16th arrondissement in Paris, although often with a rural retreat as well. As the world gets wealthier, more people may make a choice to live in this way.

However, current trends give no reason to believe that places like Manhattan or central Paris are going to increase in population and density as part of a “back-to-the-city” movement. As cities gentrify, they undoubtedly become more attractive, but increased demand leads to higher prices keeping out many families who might choose to live in

them. Furthermore, the gentrifiers tend to have smaller families than those they replace, and they also tend to demand more room, larger and better equipped housing units, more parks and open spaces. Because of this, the gentrifiers, citing the need to preserve existing neighborhoods, frequently put up all kinds of barriers to new development and increased population and density, particularly by less affluent citizens. For all these reasons, existing city centers in the affluent world are unlikely to accommodate a significantly larger percentage of the population.

Even in the developing countries, as urbanist Shlomo Angel has shown, most cities are spreading outward at ever lower overall densities just as cities have been doing for many years in the affluent West. For those who don't have a lot of affluence, and even some who do, low density suburban- and increasingly, even lower density exurban- living, remains alluring for many in both the affluent and the developing world. In fact, we might even be seeing the initial stages of a major reversal of the kind of urbanization that characterized industrializing cities in the West in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The sharp increase in houses outside Omro may presage at least a partial return to a pre-industrial condition seen, for example, in nineteenth century America when people were more evenly spread across the landscape.

This continuing urban sprawl is, of course, deplored by many of those who celebrate the supposed triumph of the "urban age." Yet as I have argued in my book *Sprawl: A Compact History*, this phenomenon is by no means as bad as most anti-sprawl crusaders imagine it to be. Continuing to spread the population could conceivably result in a more equitable, more sustainable pattern of living, particularly as renewable energy and other resources are harvested close to home with less need of the giant systems necessary to maintain our dense industrial-age cities. In any case, despite all of the planning regulations put in place in cities throughout the affluent world to control growth at the edge, the periphery continues, inexorably, to expand almost everywhere.

Nowhere does the evidence suggest that we are witnessing the final triumph of the traditional high-density city. In fact, the much-ballyhooed urban majority might be in great part a statistical artifact, a way of counting the population that over-emphasizes the move from country to city and fails to account for the powerful counter-movement from the city back toward the countryside. Indeed the emerging reality of overlapping patterns of high density centers, lower-density peripheries and vast areas of very low density urban settlement, all of them interspersed with agricultural lands and protected open spaces, threatens to upend altogether the traditional notion of what it means to be urban.

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Photo by urbanfeel.