A Tale of Blue Cities

By Daniela Blei

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THE DAY AFTER President Obama won the 2012 election, Representative Paul Ryan, Governor Mitt Romney's running mate, declared that urban voter turnout had carried the president to a second term. Speaking at a press conference,

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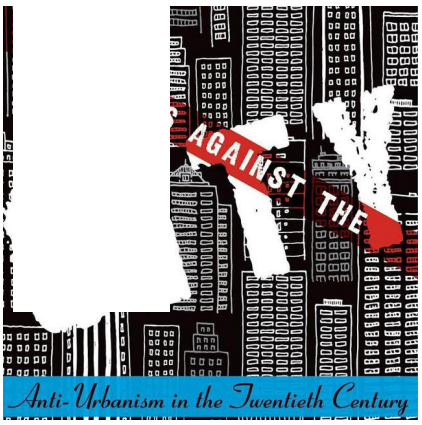

Ryan complained that Republicans had lost the election because of cities.

The GOP's anti-urbanism had already been on full display in the run-up to the presidential contest. The party platform, released in August, reflected deep Republican distrust of smart growth policies — the pro-density, anti-sprawl approach favored by urban planners and dozens of mayors around the country in cities large and small. According to Republicans, Democrats had replaced "civil engineering" with "social engineering," coercing Americans out of their cars and into cramped city dwellings. It wasn't just the Obama administration — which, despite conservative rhetoric, never pursued a national urban policy — or, the specter of bike-commuting, latte-sipping urbanists that drew Republican ire. By 2012, the city itself had become a target of GOP derision. Sarah Palin, stumping in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 2008, identified "the best of America [...] in these small towns that we get to visit, and in these wonderful little pockets of what I call the real America." The Alaska governor backed away from these remarks days later, accused of sowing division on the campaign trail. But this election cycle, Republicans have continued to pit town against country, from Paul Ryan's racially coded "real culture problem" in "our inner cities" to attacks by Ted Cruz on "New York values."

It's no secret that the GOP has abandoned the city, choosing instead to court rural and suburban voters. But this is a recent development. Until the 1990s, the country's 100 most populous counties were contested territory, according to

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I rch Center polls; in 1980 and 1984, Ronald Reagan c lid majorities in them. As recently as 2000, I is held mayoral office in half of the 12 largest US c ay, they are down to two. Democrats sit at the h of the 26 largest metropolises, and even in solid r like Texas and Arizona, big-city governance is blue. Political divisions are now a matter of simple geography. It wasn't always this way. A few books that sit at the crossroads of urban history and urban planning explore the changing political cultures of the urban past and present. They challenge us to think seriously about what cities can and should be.

Take My Mother, Please!
By Annabelle Gurwitch

Steven Conn's *Americans Against the City: Anti-Urbanism in the Twentieth Century* (2014) is about the power of ideas to shape the physical landscape. Writing for historians, urbanists, and the general public, Conn — the W. E. Smith Professor of History at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio — chronicles a long, bipartisan tradition of hating cities. One conclusion to be drawn from his engaging account is that the present bears very little resemblance to the past. For the first time in US history, the city is being embraced by large segments of the population. The country is more urban than ever, despite a century of anti-urban policies pushed by Republicans and Democrats alike. The 2010 census identified 80.7 percent of Americans living in "urban areas," with California, land of the freeway, at the top of the list, counting almost 95 percent of its residents as urban area-dwellers.

Because the category "urban areas" encompasses city and suburb, it is notoriously imprecise. But the fact remains that many cities are growing, attracting new residents and jobs. According to a report released in April, 20 large urban counties amounting to less than one percent of the country's

ities and 17 percent of the population, accounted
lf of all new businesses created since the Great
In a striking reversal, suburbs are beginning to
like cities, densifying to become more enticing
live and work. Urbanization is redrawing the
ap; in major metropolitan areas, suburbs that voted red in 1996 and 2000 are now trending blue.

Anti-urbanism used to lean right and left, Conn tells us, almost in equal measure. For much of US history, the city was all fear and negative associations: poverty, filth, crime, corruption, uncomfortable mixing of racial and ethnic groups, stifling regulation, unrest brewing in close quarters, environmental decay, and — more than anything else — economic crisis. The notion that large numbers of people should be concentrated in small spaces was viewed, from the beginning of the republic, as a threat to prosperity, public health, and democracy. The nation's capital was created not in New York or Philadelphia, its cultural and economic centers, Conn reminds us, but on a mosquito-infested swamp, the Potomac, a symbolic location. Thomas Jefferson, the first president inaugurated there, envisioned an agrarian republic, where yeoman farmers would work freely and "avoid the miseries of the concentrated urban working classes."

Even our most celebrated urbanists, Frank Lloyd Wright and Lewis Mumford among them, approached density with ambivalence or even outright hostility. Wright, writing in 1932, likened the "overgrown United States city" to a "malignant tumor" that endangered the future of humanity. A theme of Franklin D. Roosevelt's first presidential campaign was remedying "the overbalance of population in our industrial centers." For Roosevelt, whose political

s as heavily urban, yet whose personal preferences
v idedly rural, the New Deal presented an
c y to decentralize the country. Greenbelt towns
a ennessee Valley Authority were the work of big
g it, says Conn, but for the purpose of dispersing
A into small villages. New Deal administrators privileged private rural housing over its public urban counterpart.

Conn's cast of anti-urbanists goes far beyond the traditional run of conservatives, who long derided the city as a den of vice and crime, where minorities, immigrants, and single women threatened the established moral order. Instead, Conn looks at progressive planners who sought to solve urban problems by dismantling the city. He examines pastoral longings as old as the Industrial Revolution that have captured hearts and minds in every generation. As recently as the 1960s and 1970s, back-to-the-land movements saw the city as synonymous with the disenchantments of the modern world: the loss of community, authenticity, and sense of place. For environmentalists focused on clear air, clean water, and wilderness conservation, utopia was rural. Hippies and homesteaders spurned the shared, public character of city life, just like conservatives did.

What cities are for and to whom they belong are questions as old as Aristotle, but they're still with us, and in recent years, have taken on new urgency. In 1985, Kenneth T. Jackson published *Crabgrass Frontier*, a sweeping history of suburban sprawl that showed how interstate highway construction, mortgage subsidies, and tax breaks conspired to de-urbanize the country, making the United States unlike anywhere else in the world. The 1960 census augured the beginning of the end: white flight and the loss of jobs and

t from industrial city centers. Suburban hegemony
s evitable. Historians of the urban United States,
r ously Thomas J. Sugrue, whose study of Detroit
v Bancroft Prize in 1998, put systemic racism and
c tion, together with structural economic change, at
t of urban crisis narratives. We learn from Conn's story that planners and administrators were also responsible for the city's undoing. The very people tasked with postwar urban renewal ruined cities because they never really wanted them. Urban decline was due to "a failure of ideas and imagination," writes Conn, the result of the American myth that density — dangerous and unnatural — should be avoided.

The built environment is a repository of political ideas, but we often forget, not realizing that what seems normal today is the result of zoning, a powerful yet invisible mechanism that shapes the world around us. This is the starting point of Sonia Hirt's *Zoned in the USA: The Origins and Implications of American Land-Use Regulation* (2014). Hirt, a professor and dean in the College of Architecture and Urban Studies at Virginia Tech, came to the United States from Bulgaria. Drawing international comparisons throughout her story, she never loses sight of just how strange the American landscape is. City zoning ordinances should make for leaden reading, but Hirt's analysis of land-use regulations as "culturally loaded constructs" conveying how Americans want to live, is absorbing. Since the inception of zoning codes in the late 19th century, explains Hirt, freedom was conceived in terms of geographic isolation. The organizing principle was the detached single-family home, ensuring privacy and the chance to avoid mingling with other races and classes.

I y begins at the turn of the 20th century, when r authorities, protective of "spatial homogeneity," p multifamily and commercial land use in r areas. These rigid regulations formed an " web" that lies beneath every American city — even today, because the rules have hardly changed in nearly a century. On a global scale of homeownership, the United States ranks 17th out of 26 nations. At the federal level, where hardly any land-use regulations exist, the United States is also an oddity. The federal government owns more than 630 million acres of land, yet there is no national land use law. (Only in Canada is there anything similar.) There are no significant state-level regulations either, with the exception of Oregon, a regional planning pioneer. The country's "moral geography," says Hirt, fragmented and fixed by anti-density regulations and anti-urban impulses, flies in the face of all that soaring rhetoric about freedom and opportunity.

Given this history, no one could have predicted what cities look like today. The so-called urban renaissance has become a defining feature of policy and planning discussions in Los Angeles, New York, Houston, Austin, Charlotte, Salt Lake City, and Denver, among other places. Many Americans, especially young ones, now view the concentration of large numbers of people in small spaces as desirable — a sign of cultural vitality.

"New urban people aren't just or even primarily drawn by the jobs," Conn told me. "They see a value in urban life that can't be quantified: the pleasures of living with diversity; an appreciation for old buildings; the sense of living in a place that has layers of history." *Americans Against the City* is about the past, but brings into relief the surprising character of the

e are now witnessing the first pro-urban moment
ory. No longer at odds with global trends, the US
is densifying. Americans are behaving like the
world, and densification is shifting the meanings
public life. "The city has always represented and
ublic virtues as opposed to private ones," says Conn. "But those got lost in the 1970s and '80s. Perhaps they are being rediscovered now, which explains all the people in coffee shops, city parks, street festivals, and the rest." Environmentalists have contributed to this turnaround; the city, once anathema to the movement, is now hailed, in the age of climate change, for its sustainability.

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The problem is that these expanding cultural horizons have been met with shrinking economic opportunity. The city's egalitarian promises of inclusion, tolerance, and livability are belied by skyrocketing rents, cash-strapped public schools, teacher shortages, and ailing mass transit. This is the context in which "New York values" have become a shorthand for the "liberal elite," the city an exclusive playground offering $20 locally-sourced burgers, tony private schools, and fitness studios for the one percent. San Francisco, the city where I live, has been in the throes of an affordable housing crisis for years; evictions and displacement are rife across the region. Median rent topped $4,500 in June, according to the real estate website Zillow, while the median price of a single-family home *fell* to $1.12 million.

For every 100,000 San Francisco residents, 795 are homeless. In a recent homeless survey, 71 percent of respondents reported that they were living in the city when they lost

t e, a finding that dispels the urban legend that " me to San Francisco to be homeless." The tech b ght an influx of workers to the city, which was p ned for, and this lack of preparation — combined v aucratic red tape and NIMBY-ism — has driven f om the region or, worse, onto the streets. The exponential growth of real estate speculation has only added to the housing problem, most dramatically in New York City, where Russian oligarchs have gobbled up available living space for at least a decade. "If we want cities to remain the best cross-section of American life, not only racially and ethnically, but also in terms of class," says Conn, "then we have to acknowledge that in New York, Boston, and San Francisco, the private market will not produce affordable housing."

A distorted market is pricing Americans out of cities like San Francisco, while places that haven't experienced the so-called urban renaissance — shrinking Rust Belt cities, in particular — are simply ignored. As a field, urban planning focuses on growth, Conn pointed out to me; no one prepares for contraction. Given the challenges of reinventing old industrial centers, and the complexity of the affordable housing puzzle, can administrators at City Hall, or even state legislators, find solutions on their own? The question remains whether Washington will take up urban housing policy in ways it hasn't since the 1970s, beyond piecemeal programs like Section 8, which critics say is poorly designed, and Hope VI grants, which target only the most distressed public housing developments. This election season, candidates from both political parties have touted public infrastructure projects as forms of economic rebuilding. Like all urban infrastructure, housing requires advance planning. But it is rarely treated as such.

I hibitions on Robert Moses offered a revisionist t long-reviled local developer. While the image of M still that of an authoritarian bully, he now r a bygone moment, when ambitious, large-scale u ign was imaginable — even possible. Context m[illegible]ys Hilary Ballon, professor of urban studies and architecture at New York University and curator of the 2007 exhibition *Robert Moses and the Modern City*, which was held at three New York City museums. "Moses was not a lone figure who achieved extensive building projects in New York because he was purely and singularly powerful and effective," Ballon told me, referring to Robert Caro's portrayal of an antihero in *The Power Broker*, his 1974 Pulitzer Prize–winning biography. "Because it was a federal priority, Moses was able to secure federal dollars and achieve the things he did," Ballon explains. Before planning commissions, local boards, and a morass of regulations, there was Moses, whose top-down approach and big-picture thinking are now credited with saving a moribund city. Could a modern-day Moses solve today's infrastructure problems or the affordable housing crisis?

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Like other academic disciplines, urban planning was born in Germany at the end of the 19th century. Germany resembled the United States at the time: it was a young nation, deeply divided and on the rebound from civil war in the 1860s. Both countries experienced rapid industrialization and were transformed in dramatic ways in the 1880s and 1890s; their populations multiplied, cities swelled, and a chorus of anti-urbanists responded. But the parallels end there. German plans to impose order from above were guided by strong government and powerful public health movements that

c civic planning, pushing public concerns over
p d personal interests. This legacy is enshrined in
A of the Basic Law, the German constitution:
" entails obligations. Its use shall also serve the
p d."

One of the charges levied against urban planners today is that "the public good," as professionals see it, is not necessarily what ordinary people have in mind. Joel Kotkin, an iconoclast in the field, challenges the premise that density is better and that government, or an expert class of planners, should take the lead in managing it. His new book, *The Human City: Urbanism for the Rest of Us* (2016), mounts a spirited defense of the suburbs. Dense urban living doesn't work for most Americans today, says Kotkin, especially families who can't afford private school, or prefer not to live in a shoebox because it's all they can afford. Instead of the city-versus-sprawl binary, Kotkin proposes a continuum, where there is room for different geographies, and nothing is static. Urbanites "write about the suburbs as if nothing has changed in decades," Kotkin says, and not without snobbish disparagement. "Where people are fatter and slower and dumber" is how a Seattle alt-weekly put it.

Kotkin believes that personal preferences should dictate the shape of the landscape, not the imperious designs of out-of-touch planners. "The more we pour public resources into making second-rate Manhattans, the more neighborhoods fail," he told me, painting a picture of a post-suburban, multipolar city — "an archipelago of villages" — where more people work at home and bus lines, and ride-sharing services such as Uber and Lyft become the spine connecting the region. The model of the 19th-century city, organized around one old center, just isn't in the DNA of Los Angeles

c :, insists Kotkin, so we should stop trying to force
i Angeles, rail expansion continues, he added,
c : city's declining share of transit riders: the figures
a oday than in 1990.

I :ention often falls on urban growth and gentrification, but much of Kotkin's research, looking beyond hipster enclaves, tells a story of urban decline. In an essay that appeared in August on NewGeography.com, where he is executive editor, he uses IRS migration data to examine the California context. The state is losing poor and young residents in large numbers, Kotkin finds, and upward mobility has stalled. Aside from the Bay Area's burgeoning upper classes, growth is now limited to the Inland Empire, a sprawling expanse of suburban development east of Los Angeles. US census data measures large "urban areas," but demographers, zooming in on traditional urban cores, have discovered that cities are shrinking, explains Kotkin, shedding people and jobs. He predicts an aging, affluent, and inegalitarian California, where the pursuit of a middle-class lifestyle becomes more difficult.

This "declinist" view stands in contrast not only to Governor Brown's boosterism, but also to California's historical role as a land of opportunity, welcoming of outsiders, especially the young. Kotkin blames policymakers and planners, ensconced in government and academia, for pursuing a vision of dense urban living that comes at the expense of ordinary people — the teachers, nurses, firefighters, ambulance drivers, line cooks, and dishwashers that every city needs. In the age of Trump and Brexit, his arguments should reverberate beyond his Southern California environs.

In planning circles, Kotkin's views are tantamount to h When Oxford University geographer Marcial I published "Growing Cities Sustainably" in 2012 i *nal of the American Planning Association (JAPA)*, using a r simulation model that examined the effects of smart growth policies and presented some negative outcomes associated with them, a war broke out in the field. Scholars complained to the journals' editors: how could they publish something so irresponsible? Some disputed Echenique's methodology, but most opposed his work on ideological grounds. Heated debates erupted on PLANET, an academic listserv, and at professional conferences, over the merits of Echenique's findings and what the discipline's mission should be: advocating for density, which practitioners believe is conducive to positive social and environmental change, or allowing skeptics to challenge the guiding principles of the field?

Germany gave us urban planning at the end of the 19th century. Jane Jacobs gave urbanists a lodestar at the end of the 20th: *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published in 1961, was an impassioned plea for denser, more diverse cities. What mattered most to Jacobs was the view from the sidewalk; vibrancy that came not from the cold, ordered designs of modernists but from "a jumping, joyous urban jumble." City planning required a bottom-up approach, according to Jacobs, participatory, democratic, and humane. This was an organic process that relied on local knowledge. Robert Moses was the enemy.

For Jacobs, the city wasn't only a cultural phenomenon. In *The Economy of Cities*, her lesser-known book that came out in 1969, she upended conventional wisdom by defining the urban as primary and the rural as secondary in driving

development. Historically it was cities, argued at served as nodes of knowledge diffusion, , and opportunity. "Cities don't lure the middle create it," she declared in *Death and Life*, an engine of upward mobility — a place where esses and small manufacturers thrived.

Today, this vision seems romantic, her words nostalgic. Jacobs could not have imagined, writing in 1961 or 1970, the city's metamorphosis in form and function; that local labor would give way to multinational firms and other enterprises in the service of a global economy. French geographer Jean Gottmann announced "the coming of the transactional city" in 1983, predicting a post-industrial information age in which the city would become a "host environment," supplying infrastructure and support for transactional activities based on flows of knowledge, data, and other invisible commodities. Would there be room in this new urban ecosystem for anything else? Around the same time, Kenneth T. Jackson anticipated the end of "the long process of suburbanization, which has been operative in the United States since about 1815." "There are powerful economic and demographic forces," he concluded in the final pages of *Crabgrass Frontier*, "that will tend to undercut the decentralizing process." Whether the current urban moment is permanent or, as Kotkin suggests, a passing phase that is more hype than substance, no one really knows. But the urban future will likely be less about the changing shape of landscape — whether cities are growing, shrinking, or staying the same — and more about what cities are for and who gets to live in them.

Economic inequality has become the most important theme of the 2016 election. Without soaring poverty rates,

incomes, and middle-class desperation, it's imagine a Trump candidacy. "Democrats have failed in the inner cities," inveighed the GOP n the campaign trail. "Poverty. Rejection. Horrible No housing, no homes, no ownership." Trump pping into racism and xenophobia, or drawing on the old theme of the United States as agrarian empire. But his words resonate with millions of Americans for whom the city is now the embodiment of inequality.

According to the Make Room campaign, a national initiative based in Washington, DC that works to raise awareness about the rental affordability crisis, almost all new rental housing is "luxury," built for high-income earners. A 2016 report by Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies discovered that a record 11.4 million Americans spend more than half their income on rent. "Cost burdens are rapidly spreading among moderate-income households as well," the findings showed, "especially in higher-cost coastal markets." Hillary Clinton has announced a $25 billion housing investment program, including low-income housing tax credits and down-payment assistance. Trump continues to decry inequality and Democratic prescriptions, but hasn't offered much beyond vague notions about the natural order of things emerging spontaneously from the market. If election-watchers turn out to be right, and Clinton becomes president and her party takes the Senate, Democrats will have a political mandate, a real opportunity, to rethink housing policy and other urban issues. Otherwise, the urban moment runs the risk of becoming just that: an exception in the United States's long history of hating cities.

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Very interesting review, I want to read the book.

I would put Joel Kotkin squarely in the tradition of anti-urban "urbanists." For these folks, if the city is crumbling and losing residents, it's obviously bad. But if it's growing and gaining population, it's still bad! I think any fair-minded planner wants to think about and mitigate negative effects that smart growth can cause/exacerbate (like gentrification).Someone telling us there's no reason for density isn't really useful, credible, or historically informed.

Republicans in the late 20th Century were not necessarily anti-urban. I remember a Republican party in the Northeastern U.S. which stood for reform and clean government, as opposed to Democratic Party machines. Somewhere along the line that approach vanished--maybe it got swallowed up by the overweening racism of Mayors Guiliani and Rizzo (who started as a Democrat, but switched).

One irony is that some NIMBYs I know have seized on Jane Jacobs' writing and twisted it. Jacobs was against Corbusierian isolated urban renewal towers, these folks invoke her name to fight four story buildings on commercial corridors that Jacobs would have embraced.

Minor quibble--Robert Moses wasn't chronologically before Planning Commissions, but he always managed to situate himself in bureaucratic positions where there would be little or no public or legislative oversight. He's a complicated figure, who delivered a lot of good (and bad) infrastructure to New York.

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