Objective: This is an upper-division undergraduate course whose purpose is to provide a survey of the urban history of the United States from the colonial period through today. Topics include colonial beginnings, westward expansion, the industrial city, changing technologies, changes in urban social and spatial structure, urban politics, migration and immigration, city boosterism, suburbanization, national urban policy, social movements, urban economic decline, recreation, urban design, and central city revitalization. While the course is taught in a lecture format, it is intended to serve students as a “laboratory,” in which the City of Portland and other cities with
which students are familiar serve as laboratories. As with any “lab class,” students actively participate in class discussions based on readings, lectures, research, tours, and presentations.


**Assignments:** Students are expected to read thoroughly all of the reading assignments listed below in the class schedule. Questions are provided for each class-day’s reading assignments to serve as (1) a guide for reading and understanding the topic and (2) preparation for class discussion. These questions *will* generally be covered in class and students will be asked, at random, to respond to questions. Therefore, *read each assignment* with attention to the questions. Each student will be given opportunities to respond to questions; participation in class is expected, so *READ EACH ASSIGNMENT AND USE THE QUESTIONS IN THIS SYLLABUS AS YOUR GUIDE TO THE READINGS.*

**Exams:** There will be two exams, a midterm (25% of grade) and a final (25% of grade). The midterm exam, to be given on Thursday, February 16 will consist of short-answer essay questions and will be based on the readings, discussions, and lectures through February 14. The final examination—to be administered on Thursday, March 22, 8:00-9:50 a.m. in the classroom—will consist of essay questions allowing you the opportunity to demonstrate an understanding of the core themes, issues, and topics of American urban history. Students are expected to bring to both exams knowledge derived from the readings, lectures, in-class discussions, tours, films, and any other sources that can augment their essays. To best prepare for examinations, attend class, take good notes, do the readings, and actively participate in class discussions. As ever, ask the instructor if you have *any* questions. The exams will *not* be “open book.”

**Exhibit:** All students must complete an exhibit project, which will amount to 50% of your grade. The project for this course will be to research, design, create, and present an “electronic exhibit” about an American city, focusing on a city and theme of your choice. Your “exhibit” will be intended for use in the digital galleries of the Museum of the City (www.museumofthecity.org), a virtual museum of cities established in partnership with, and as a museum for, Portland State University. (The instructor will discuss the Museum during the first week of class.) You may choose a topic from the list attached at the end of this syllabus as long as it relates to American cities. If you have questions about selecting a topic for your exhibit and/or if you have questions during your work on it, be sure to speak with the instructor. Your exhibit project will be graded for substance and text, as well as for the appropriateness of the images/video you use in your exhibit. *Choose your exhibit topic by Thursday, February 2* and submit a one-paragraph project proposal (also due on February 2). *Your exhibit is due no later than* Tuesday, March 6 (even if you won’t be presenting it until one of the three later dates), so you will want to begin work on it by the first week of February, *at the latest.*

The exhibits for this class will be prepared using the “Exhibit-Builder Tool” of the Museum of
the City. ([www.museumofthecity.org](http://www.museumofthecity.org)) The use of this tool will be explained early in the term. Exhibits may end up in the electronic galleries of the Museum, in which case they would potentially be seen by museum visitors from around the world. Therefore, clarity is essential, as are an interesting topic and an equally interesting presentation of illustrations and text. Even though the text for your exhibit will be relatively brief, it must be clear, factual, and capable of engaging exhibit viewers (members of the general public, for some of whom English is their second language, and whose ages might range from 10 to 100). All students in this class are expected to write at university-level standards:

~Use proper grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, etc.
~Use your word processor’s grammar and spell-check
~Proofread! (Do not rely solely on your word processor to find errors!)

Don’t hesitate to speak with the instructor if you have any questions.

Exhibit presentations: We will critique each others’ exhibits on March 6 (last names A-D), March 8 (E-L), March 13 (M-S), and March 15 (S-Z). We will take the time on these dates, along with discussing the remaining readings for that day, to have presentations on the exhibits. Each student will provide a (no more than) five-minute presentation on his or her exhibit, explaining to the class the objectives of the exhibit, presenting it, and responding to any questions/comments from fellow students, guests, and the instructor. In addition, you will be expected to hand in a hard copy of your text and images, or a brief description of your video, on March 6.

The exhibit, as with the exams, is to be your own work. Like graft (a topic we’ll briefly cover in class), plagiarism is unacceptable behavior. Plagiarism, most simply, is using someone else’s ideas, work, and/or words, without attribution, and representing them as your own.

**Grading:**

Midterm: 25%
Final: 25%
Exhibit: 50%

**Class Expectations:**

The exhibit and the exams completed on time unless there are emergency circumstances. You are expected and encouraged to actively participate in class. You should contact the instructor to discuss any concerns related to this class.

Electronic devices: The use of phones, iPods, etc., in class is very disruptive, and prohibited. **Set all electronic devices on “silent” mode.**

Attendance is expected in each class and will be taken. Unless you make prior arrangements with the instructor, please refrain from arriving late or leaving early, as these behaviors are disruptive to others. Thank you!
Class Schedule, Topics, Readings, and Questions

TTW: The city, however, does not tell its past; it contains it like the lines of a hand. Italo Calvino

January 10:  
Introduction to the course
Course objectives

January 12:  
Cities in History, an Overview

Film: “AMERICA BY DESIGN: The Street”

January 17:  
Urban America in the Colonial Age
Chudacoff, Chap. 1

Questions:
There were certain community responsibilities shared by almost all citizens in 18th c. American cities. Describe some of them. 
Tell us something about America’s first Native American communities.
Describe the role and work of public safety and fire “officials” in early American cities.
Tell us about the role of slaves in 18th c. American cities.
Tell us about the role of women.
Compare the role played by taverns and coffeehouses in the 18th c. with the role they play today.
What were some of the educational and cultural opportunities and amenities offered in Colonial cities?
What role did Colonial cities play in the American Revolution?

January 19: Commercialization and Urban Expansion in the New Nation, 1776-1860
Chudacoff, Chap. 2
Abbott, Chap. 1

Questions:
What was the role of cities in the establishment of constitutional government?
What role did new settlements and towns play in westward expansion?
What was Santa Fe like?
What are the four criteria for creating a “town” that Abbott lists?
Describe the changes in city charters as cities grew during the first half of the 19th c.
Describe “Urban Imperialism.”
Tell us about police and fire-fighting in early 19th c. cities.
Describe the background and creation of such urban institutions as almshouses, workhouses, and schools.
Describe the symbiosis between cities and the countryside.
How did San Antonio exemplify such symbiosis?
Tell us about middle class America of the 1830s-1850s, including the emergence of the middle class, the roles of women and men, and domestic life.
Describe the effect of urbanization on women and children.
Describe the role of the railroads, canals, and the telegraph on urbanization.

TTW: SICINIUS: What is the city but the people?
CITIZENS: True, the people are the city. Shakespeare, Coriolanus

January 24: Life in the Walking City
Chudacoff, Chap. 3

Questions:
Picture (describe) for us a street scene in 1830s New York, Boston, or Philadelphia.
What do you think were some of the challenges to a new wage-earner (laborer or factory worker) whose previous life (and that of his forebears) had been more an experience of self-employment?
What roles did African-Americans play in 19th c. urban America?
Describe the emerging role of immigrants in early 19th c. cities. Who were they, where did they come from, what new institutions did they help establish?
How do you think an abolitionist printer might have been treated if his shop were located near a
district of Irish working class families?
How did the Civil War affect cities in different parts of the nation?

**January 26:** *The Horse and Steam-Driven City*

**Tour:** “Old Town: The City’s Early Years” (meet at Skidmore Fountain, 8 am)

_TTW_: Overturn, overturn, overturn! is the maxim of New York. The very bones of our ancestors are not permitted to be quiet a quarter of a century, and one generation of men seem studious to remove all relics of those which preceded them. *Harper’s Weekly*

**January 31:** *The Transformation of Urban Space, 1850-1920*

Chudacoff, Chap. 4
Abbott, Chap. 2

Film: “FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED and the Public Park in America”

**Questions:**
What were some of the new means of mass transportation from the 1830s through the 1880s and what were the social implications of these new modes of transit?

- economic
- political

Picture for us the emerging downtown districts of major American cities in the 1850s. Describe for us what Americans did for recreation and “cultural” amusement from mid-century through the turn of the century. What were some of the characteristics of the new urban life?

What role did Central Park play in New York City and nationwide? How did mass transportation and the advent of suburbs alter the traditional “walking city?” Describe some of the qualities of new suburbs of the era 1850-1920. Summarize the relationship between the two processes of urbanization and industrialization at the onset of the Civil War. Consider the centralization of resources labor transportation communications

Abbott describes “Gateway Cities.” (See map on page 43.) What were the economic and social roles these cities in the expanding nation?

**February 2:** *Newcomers and the Urban Core, 1850-1920*

Chudacoff, Chap. 5
Abbott, Chap. 3

**Exhibit Project topics are due today:** One paragraph describing your exhibit project.

Film: “Building Chicago, The First Hundred Years”
Questions:
Who were the newcomers to American cities during this period (1850-1920)?
Describe how European immigrants would have affected the urban environment in America of the 1880s.
How did the experience of African-Americans differ from that of European immigrants in the latter half of the 19th c.?
Briefly describe the life of a laborer living in New York City, from her living conditions and transportation to her working environment.
Describe what life would have been like in a western Chinatown.
What role did discoveries in medicine and germ theory play in improving urban living conditions?
What were some of the social, economic, and political conditions that resulted from poverty and inner-city housing?
How did elements of immigrants’ original culture help them cope with their new lives?
Describe the role of taverns and bars in turn-of-the-century cities.

TTW: Long ago it was said that “one half of the world does not know how the other half lives.” That was true then. It did not know because it did not care. The half that was on top cared little for the struggles, and less for the fate of those who were underneath, so long as it was able to hold them there and keep its own seat. There came a time when the discomfort and crowding below were so great, and the consequent upheavals so violent, that it was no longer an easy thing to do, and then the upper half fell to inquiring what was the matter. Information on the subject has been accumulating rapidly since, and the whole world has had its hands full answering for its old ignorance. Jacob Riis

February 7: City Politics in the Era of Transformation
Chudacoff, Chap. 6

Questions:
Describe the functions of the “machine” in 19th c. urban politics.
    How did the machine serve immigrants?
    How did the machine serve neighborhoods?
    Describe the characteristics of the successful “boss.”
Describe the use of graft (“honest” and “dishonest”) in city politics
Very briefly, who was William Marcy Tweed and what did he do?
What methods of municipal, or civic, reform were used to combat bosses? Consider:
    electoral reform
        evolution from wards to city-wide representation
        at-large elections
        civil service
    changes in city charters
    public ownership of gas, electric, and transportation systems
Did civic reform succeed, in general?

February 9: Refashioning the Social and Physical Environment
Chudacoff, Chap. 7
Take a look at this virtual tour of the Columbian Exposition:
http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma96/wce/title.html

Tour: “The City Beautiful in Portland” (Meet by the “Umbrella Man” in Pioneer Courthouse Square)

Questions:
What role did investigative journalism and, even, literature play in the social and civic reform movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries?
Describe for us the Social Gospel and some of the programs through which it was implemented. How did reformers envision educational reform serving as part of the foundation of social reform in turn-of-the-century American cities? What role could education play?
Explain the role played by settlement houses; i.e., how they served as an “arena of reform.”
In what ways did the Progressive Era differ from earlier reform efforts?
What are some of the legacies--in Portland and/or elsewhere--of the City Beautiful movement?
Describe some of the successes of the Urban Liberals in effecting changes in politics and working conditions.

TTW: The serious problems of the cities are largely insoluble now and will be for the foreseeable future. Edward Banfield

February 14: Cities in an Age of Metropolitanism, the 1920s and 1930s
Chudacoff, Chap. 8

Assignment: Interview a grandparent or acquaintance who is 80+ years old about this era. Come prepared to share his/her perspective on life during the 1930s.

Questions:
What were some of the events that impelled urban growth immediately following World War I?
What was taking place in terms of internal migration and foreign immigration during the 1920s?
What role did industrial decentralization play in suburbanization in terms of moving people out of the city, transportation, and land use in the suburbs?
What happened to streetcars in the 1920s and 1930s?
Tell us about the relationship of suburban manufacturing facilities and the proliferation downtown of corporate offices in skyscrapers.
What were some of the characteristics of “metropolitan districts” as they evolved in the 1920s and 1930s?
Considering the advent of the “consumer culture,” how might a middle-class, Portland family of four have spent its leisure hours over a week’s time in the summer of the 1920s?
How did organized crime get its start in the 1920s?
What is the history of race relations in the 1920s?
What inspired the rise of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in cities in the early 1920s?
How might that same middle-class Portland family have been impacted by the Great Depression; picture the family’s possible new Depression lifestyle?
Describe some of the “alphabet agencies” created under Franklin D. Roosevelt and how they assisted cities’ ability to cope with Depression-era problems.

February 16:  
*Personal Retrospective*
Midterm Examination (you may use your notes, but not your texts)

**TTW:** “The other part of me wanted to get out and stay out, but this was the part I never listened to. Because if I ever had I would have stayed in the town where I was born... I might even have got rich – small-town rich, an eight-room house, two cars in the garage, chicken every Sunday and the Reader’s Digest on the living-room table, the wife with a cast-iron permanent, and me with a brain like a sack of cement. You take it, friend. I’ll take the big, sordid, dirty, crooked city.” Raymond Chandler

February 21:  
*War and the Westward Tilt, 1940-1950*
Abbott, pp. 163-185

**Assignment:** Interview a grandparent or acquaintance who is 70+ years old about this era. Come prepared to share his/her perspective on life during the 1940s and 1950s.

**Questions:**
What were some of the assets that western cities had that facilitated their recruitment into the war effort?

How did WWII impact American cities? Consider: Housing  
Industrialization  
Issues of racism and segregation

Define the meaning of “westward tilt” in describing urban growth during the war years.

**NOTICE!!** There is a lot of reading assigned for next Tuesday, February 28. It is recommended that you give yourself a full week to get on top of it.

February 23:  
*The War and the Emerging “Urban Crisis,” 1941-1975*
Chudacoff, Chap. 9

**Questions:**
How did Arthur Levitt and Sons exemplify the postwar housing boom?
What were the racial dimensions of postwar urban sprawl?
With the benefit of hindsight, what were some of the problems inherent in the Housing Act of 1949?
How did the intent of 1950s and 1960s urban renewal differ from the actual results?
   What were the intended goals?
   What actually resulted?
How did the reactions to discrimination affect cities in the 1950s and 1960s?
While Presidents Kennedy and Johnson made efforts to provide more effective federal assistance to cities, why did “Great Society” urban spending (Model Cities projects) run into problems?
How did life in the 1950s-1970s suburbs affect the lives of women?
As suburbanites of the 1950s-1970s shifted from party-loyalty to issue-orientation, what were some of the issues that concerned them?

Describe “gentrification” and where we see it in the Portland metropolitan region.

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**TTW:** Cities are growing so fast that their arteries are showing through their outskirts. Clyde Moore.

**February 28:**  *American Cities at the End of the Twentieth Century*

Chudacoff, Chap. 10  
Abbott, Chap. 13

**Questions:**

Describe “revenue sharing” with regard to federal policy toward cities in the 1970s.

How did President Reagan’s philosophy and actions differ in regard to cities from those of his predecessors of the previous 20 years?

In 1969, Nixon advisor (later NY Senator) Patrick Moynihan used the term “benign neglect” to define a philosophy toward poverty. How might the term be used to describe the last three presidents’ policies toward American cities?

Describe the concept of the “supersuburb.” Joel Garreau’s term, “edge cities,” and where such are found in the Portland metropolitan region. To what extent are American cities becoming “edgeless?” Consider what Kunstler says in his essay, “Joyride.”

Discuss the term “conurbation” and give us some examples nationwide. What are some possible consequences for such realms in terms of transit, governance, and sheer livability – especially as suggested by Kunstler in his essay, “Joyride?”

Considering where Portland and other American cities have come from, where do you see the Portland region heading in the next 25 years?

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**March 1:**  *Transnational Cities*

Abbott, Chap. 14

**Questions:**

How would you describe Seattle as an “international city?”

What are the lessons that Seattle, Vancouver, BC, El Paso, and Los Angeles tell us about western cities?

How does globalization affect Portland?

How has the “balance of power” evolved between metropolitan centers and their growing suburbs since World War II?

Explain the term “growth management,” particularly in terms of Oregon’s own experience since 1970.

Generally, how would you differentiate the development of western cities from eastern cities over the past 50 years? Consider such factors as trade, tourism, and the growth of ethnic communities.

Is characterizing western cities as “mere” home to freeways, commercial strips, and sprawling suburbia fair? Why or why not?
March 6:  *Cities and Country in the American West*
Abbott, Chap. 15
Essay, “‘Round the Next Bend,” by Donald Snow (attached to syllabus)

Exhibit Project Presentations

Questions:
As transportation and communications networks have evolved over the 20th century, how have the roles of such regional centers as Portland, Seattle, and San Francisco evolved? How have regional centers related to “second-level cities and towns?” Describe the effects of north-south movement between western cities. Consider the recent experience of Bend, Oregon, as described in Donald Snow’s essay, “‘Round the Next Bend.” What have been some of the results of the shift from factory and farm jobs in the rural West to a service and tourism economy? Consider the history of The Dalles, Bend, and other western cities.
How well have historians, writers, and filmmakers coped with the tensions between the urban and rural parts of the West over the past 150 years? Has the West been, in Bernard DeVoto’s words, “a plundered province?” Is Deschutes County, where Bend is, a “plundered province?” Explain the concept of an “urban shadow,” and how expanding recreation and commuting zones has changed certain small towns into fast-growing cities. How is Bend in such a shadow and what are some other examples?

March 8:  *Western Cities and the Nation*
Abbott, Chap. Conclusion

Project Presentations

Questions:
What does it mean that western cities have been “consciously chosen environments?” By whom, why, and in what ways are choices expressed?
What are some examples of “vernacular exuberance” (in Abbott’s phrase) in western cities? How have such American ideals as “republican virtues” and “community values” been manifested in western cities?
What are some examples of that competing ethic, “dynamic individualism?”
How would you contrast Houston, Texas, to Portland, Oregon?

California cities have been characterized as promoting self-expression. How would you illustrate this cultural characteristic?
TTW: Only the modern city offers the mind the grounds on which it can achieve awareness of itself. Georg Wilhelm Hegel

March 13: Project presentations

March 15: Project Presentations

TTW: Progress, far from consisting in change depends on retentiveness. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. George Santayana

March 22: Final Examination (8:00-9:50 a.m., Rm. 250, Urban Center)
You may use your notes, but not your texts.

Course Bibliography

(Note: This is by no means a comprehensive urban history bibliography. It is intended to include some classics and important contemporary works, as well as works related to the topics of race, gender, and class.

If you have no background in urban history or are especially interested in Portland:

Portland author Eugene Snyder has written several books on early Portland.
Craig Wollner, *The City Builders: One Hundred Years of Union Carpentry in Portland, Oregon* (1990)

Both the Oregon Historical Society bookstore and Powell’s City of Books have excellent selections of books about Portland.

The following books are divided into rough chronological order (some overlap)

To 1900

Gunther Barth, *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (1979)
Thomas Bender, *Community & Social Change in America* (1978)
Lewis Mumford, *Roots of Contemporary American Architecture* (1952)
Christine Stansell, *City of Women: The Female Laboring Poor in New York City, 1789-1860* (1986)
Shane White, *Somewhat more independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810* (1991)

**1900-1920**

Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910)
Alexander B. Callow, Jr., *The Tweed Ring* (1966)
William L. Riordon, *Plunkeet of Tammany Hall* (1963)
Mel Scott, *American City Planning Since 1890* (1971)
Joel Tarr, *Transportation Innovation and Changing Spatial Patterns: Pittsburgh, 1850-1910* (1972)

**1920-1940**

Susan P. Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (1986)
Mark Foster, *From Streetcar to Superhighway: American City Planners and Urban Transportation, 1900-1940* (1981)
William D. Miller, *Harsh and Dreadful Love: Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement* (1973)

**1940 to the present**

Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (1990)
Susan S. Fainstein, Norman I. Fainstein, Richard Child Hill, Dennis R. Judd, and Michael Peter Smith, *Restructuring the City* (1986)
Paul & Percival Goodman, *Communities: Means of Livelihood and Ways of Life* (1947)
Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed and How They Fail* (1979)
Mark Rose, *Interstate: Express Highway Politics, 1941-1956*
Neil Smith & Peter Williams, *Gentrification of the City* (1986)
'Round the Next Bend
Economic opportunity in rurbia
by Donald Snow

If bumper stickers are literal signs of the times, then the times are troubled in Walla Walla, Washington, where I live. The latest local bumper sticker reads "Don't Bend Walla Walla." To people outside the Northwest, this message might make no sense, but residents of our region would instantly know what it means. It's a message warning against growth—the kind of explosive population growth that Bend, Oregon, has seen in the last two decades. With the recent, dramatic florescence of the Walla Walla wine industry, coupled with the announcement of plans to build the town's first residential golf resort, many residents here fear that their town is poised to become "the next Bend." Their fears are hardly unfounded. People in many rural counties across the nation feel that they, too, are facing a most uncertain future, for much of rural America is in trouble.

At one end of the spectrum stand the poorest communities in the United States—rural communities mired in persistent poverty—whose numbers are growing as the American agricultural and natural resource economies continue to decline. In these places, opportunities are few: younger residents are fleeing for jobs far away; local schools are closing, and the sense of optimism has become fugitive. At the other end of the spectrum are communities undergoing a wrenching and rapid transformation propelled by heavy influxes of new residents and new wealth. In the most extreme examples, communities that were "rural" by every measure just a generation ago have mutated into a fascinating kind of hybrid: they have become "rurban," a strange fusion of rural, urban, and suburban, and they have done so with a velocity and thoroughness that often astonished longtime residents.

As far as I can tell, there is not yet a clear, commonly accepted definition of "rurbia," nor a set of quantitative characteristics that define it. The word itself is simply a contraction of three words: "rural," "urban," and "suburbia." What it means, quite simply, is the arrival of urban/suburban forms of growth in the middle of rural places. At first glance one might say, "Well, gee, there's nothing new about urban growth in rural places. That's what the suburbs have always been." Rurbia often looks a lot like ordinary suburban growth, but rurban growth is different. When cities grow, people expect them to spill out into the surrounding countryside, and the residents of these soon-to-be suburbs can readily prepare for growth. They "see it coming," often years ahead. Seldom is there anything surprising about this kind of edge development. But rurbia is the arrival of urbanism in the middle of nowhere, and it is driven by the reinvestment of wealth transported from elsewhere—in nearly every case, wealth assembled from a host of distant cities, not from one immediately adjacent city.

No metropolitan centers previously existed in the most striking examples of rurban development. "Urban" or "metropolitan," according to the U.S. Census Bureau, means a concentration of fifty thousand people or more in a single, contiguous place. Bend, Oregon; Kalispell, Montana; Moab, Utah; Durango, Colorado—these were all very small towns a generation ago. I know people of my age in Walla Walla who remember when Bend had fewer than twenty thousand people. Today Bend is pushing seventy thousand in the city proper. But rurbia is not a municipal phenomenon; it is a regional phenomenon, which means that Bend's effective population is much larger. These places are no longer small towns; they are small cities—and it's not merely that they have achieved metropolitan population numbers. In fact, some of them have not. They are cities in the sense that these places have been redesigned, radically made over to appeal to urban sensibilities.

The arrival of rurbia typically comes as a shock and upsets many of our long-held assumptions about population and economic growth. Unlike the advancing suburban rim that girdles nearly every American city, places that suddenly encounter rurban development typically stand unprepared in every respect for what is to come. They often do not possess the infrastructure, the revenue-generating capacity, or the culture of decision-making needed to accommodate gracefully the sudden urban explosion. Because most rural places in the U.S. are politically conservative, with residents who pride themselves on their determined pro-development, pro-business attitudes, a good deal of confusion often accompanies the rurban explosion.

For generations, we residents who live in rural places have been saying that "growth is good, growth is what we want." But when growth finally arrives, and it doesn't show up in the forms we imagined and fought for, we're suddenly not so sure. Most of us, operating with antiquated models of economic development—what some call the "industrial park mentality"—find it quite confusing when the five-year-old business incubator our town struggled to finance remains empty or moribund, while an entirely different, entirely unexpected form of development arrives. We were trying to recruit a regional call center, a new modular home
Gauging Rurbia Readiness

Rurbia is an artifact of two strong forces in our society—the information economy and the Baby Boom—and rurbia readiness shows up suddenly like a hot blip on a national radar screen that tracks the next cool thing. For many Baby Boomers and their children (whom some refer to as "Echo Boomers"), nothing is more hip than the recently discovered out-of-the-way place, and rural people are often astonished to learn that what to them seems to be nothing more than their worn, rather plain community might be viewed by outsiders as a really cool spot. This is one of the strangest things about rurban readiness.

Places with great potential to morph into rurbia have several traits in common. First, and most important, they occupy landscapes of surpassing beauty, with ready access to outdoor recreation. But they are not necessarily gateway communities in the classic sense. Many sociologists who describe the gateway community are talking specifically about towns that lie immediately adjacent to national parks or designated recreation areas. Jackson Hole, Wyoming, would be a classic gateway community; Bend, Oregon, would not. The rurban phenomenon is thus, in a sense, redefining our notion of gateway community. The "landscape of surpassing beauty" doesn't have to mean scenery of national park grandeur. In the West, almost any mountains can serve as a worthy backdrop to rurbia. The Wallowas would be a great candidate, but even the Blue Mountains, with their more subtle beauty, might make for a fine backdrop to rurbia.

A good share of rurban development is tied to retirement, and realtors across the United States carefully map high-value retirement communities, especially the new ones where real property is still reasonably priced. Of the eighty fastest growing retirement destinations in the United States, 74 percent contain or abut national forest land. Access to forested open space seems to carry an especially high premium for rurbia-readiness.

Second, rurbia-ready places frequently have exotic or even "funny" names—the very strangeness of the nomenclature adds to their cachet of hipness. It seems best if the names derive from Native American or biblical terms, or if the name attaches to some historical novelty that touches on our sense of the mythic: Missoula is a "funny" name that does a delicious thing on the tongue. Kalispell is a memorable word; also an Indian word, it sticks in the mind. Moab carries the weight of Old Testament intonation. Jackson Hole draws from the antique lingo of the trapper era: "hole" was the colloquial name for a big valley found in the midst of mountains. (Notice that when we pair the rather ordinary name Jackson with Hole the mundane suddenly becomes romantic.) Bozeman is nothing more than the surname of a western trailblazer, John Bozeman, but notice that Bozeman-the-newly-discovered-place mutates lexicographically into "The Bozone" as soon as hipness hits. The moral here, for anyone who lives with the illusion that her homely out-of-the-way burg couldn't possibly hit the Big Board, is to take notice if you live in a place with a vibrant backstory. Think about the word Wallowa; think about names such as Walla Walla or Okanogan. Any place named Greenville is probably safe.

Third, rurbia-ready places possess hidden upscale attributes waiting to be registered by the searching public. Here's an example: Forty years ago, fishing was not upscale because most people doing it caught fish on worms and ate what they caught. And they didn't dress in any particularly striking ways, wearing blue jeans and carrying bait cans. But when the great secret about truly premium fishing got out when it became known that you can catch huge wild trout on tiny flies you tie yourself and then when fishing became catch-and-release and no longer carried the taint of being a blood sport—then and only then, fishing went upscale. Interest grew at a good clip, then went stratospheric when Brad Pitt appeared as the character Paul in the film A River Runs Through It. And he looked so great fly-fishing, wearing stuff just like the stuff you can buy at, well, at the Orvis shop in any American city. So to find the next potential rurban hot spots, think about things that are upscale today, and remember that it's hard to predict what will become upscale tomorrow. Upscale today: whitewater rafting; very exclusive golf links; telemark skiing (alpine is passe, in case you didn't know); rock climbing; vineyards and boutique winemaking; bison ranching (not cattle ranching). What'll be upscale tomorrow? Who knows? Who could have predicted the invention of the mountain bike, the snowboard, the hang glider, the $800 graphite flyrod with a single-action, stainless-steel reel made in England?

The fourth trait of rurbia is national publicity, even a little bit of it. Any place featured in Sunset or Outside magazine, or on the "Escapes" pages of the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, the San Francisco Chronicle, or the Atlanta Constitution may need to brace for the shock of discovery. If celebrities have been reported visiting—and especially if they have purchased real estate nearby—the hipness radar screen is dancing. Entertainment, sports, and even corporate celebrities who buy land in the supposed rural outback may help touch off a burst of interest. Urban connoisseurs have always been arbiters of the cool, and those connoisseurs who write the travel pages of our most urbane newspapers actually help steer tastes and choices. It doesn't
We laugh at such images, but we need to take them more seriously. One of the hallmarks of the information age is the symbolic reinvention of the self, and our old models of economic development are entirely unequipped for this new age. Ultimately people want romance—they want to drink it, eat it, ply its waters, carve its slopes, conquer its roughs. And they're willing to pay immense sums for the pleasure. Americans are accustomed to gambling their lives on an unappreciated frontier; and now that many of us have the means, we are reinventing frontier as rurbia.

Where and How Does Rurbia Happen?

The hardest point to get across is that rurbia is a regional phenomenon—it affects large, broad areas, not just a single growing town and its immediate surroundings. The rurban explosion is directly related to and dependent upon the surrounding countryside. Rurbia can't happen just anywhere—it happens in places with peculiar attributes that attach to shifting American values about landscape, personal well-being and fitness, recreation (or re-creation, if you prefer), and, yes, a sense of place. Rurbia seems to show up in areas we might describe as "landscapes of joy." When people come town-shopping in the West, what are they looking for? Ready access to public lands, lots of trails to hike or ride, interesting back roads where cyclists feel safe; free-flowing rivers and great places to ski, nice ball fields and ingeniously designed golf courses, security for themselves and their kids, decent schools, decency in general. People might be interested in the town, to be sure, but what they're really coming for is the area. Rurbia is all about the surroundings.

Next, rurbia is as much a process as it is a place—it is the process of converting rural space into what might be described as punctuated urban space. In Central Oregon, for example. Bend formed the epicenter for explosive rurban growth, but Bend itself is merely the largest island in a regionwide archipelago of urban excrescences. Central Oregon today possesses around two dozen golf courses, many of them residential destination resorts. The real money in golf, of course, is not in the game itself—it's in the snap, crackle, and pop that surround the game, expressed mostly in terms of exclusively expensive real estate coupled with membership in a sports resort that few people even realize exists. On the ground, the effects are plain enough: houses the size of small ski lodges parked along perfect fairways designed by the marquee names of the game. Each of those exclusive residential golf resorts is a tiny center of urbanism; each of the towns of Central Oregon, from Madras to Redmond to Prineville, quickly began to transform into "little Bends." Rurbia arrives, centers itself quickly in an existing community (usually the largest one in the area), converts the community to accommodate urban interests and people, and simultaneously stimulates growth in surrounding communities. The growth, of course, follows increases in property values: as Bend becomes a much more expensive place to buy or rent a home, Prineville begins to absorb the overflow. Bend gets more expensive; Prineville morphs into a bedroom community. Rurbia is not Bend; it is all of Central Oregon.

Third, in burgeoning rurban regions, what is left undeveloped is at least as important as what becomes developed. To return to the island image, rurbia proceeds like the formation of island archipelagos. The islands are patches of urbanism within a surrounding sea of rural countryside and communities. It is important to the progress of rurban growth that the surrounding rural sea remains "rural"—as open and undeveloped as possible—since it was this open terrain that was the generator of the growth in the first place. Ironically, in the rapid economic transformation that comes with rurbia, it is the absence of obvious development that feeds development.

What land developers call "build-out" is not in the best interests of rurbia. Indeed, the rurban model—if there is yet such a thing—in many respects does not conform with the old, static model of economic development in which a central "engine of growth" (such as a new factory) sets off a local chain reaction of related, attendant growth, which simply follows laissez-faire market principles. Rurban growth attempts to be both selective and protective: it selects for businesses that appeal to the newcomers; it protects, or tries to protect, the things they came for in the first place. Uncrowdedness becomes a premium social and economic good; a sense of high selectivity of new businesses to serve the new arrivals dominates the scene. The emphasis lies heavily on the upscale side. Things get expensive.

Fourth, the urban archipelagoes are of a distinct and peculiar character. It is as if the editors of Outside, Golf Digest, Bon Appetit, and the Williams-Sonoma catalog had come together to plan America's new Top Ten Best Little Cities. The rurban archipelago becomes festooned with specialty bicycle shops, Callaway golf club outlets, Orvis franchises, wine boutiques, microbreweries, dazzling workout facilities, hair parlors that hand you menus of hair opportunities when you walk in the door, and a staggering array of expensive restaurants and clothiers. Meanwhile, out in the surrounding rural sea you find "traditional" businesses paddling for their very lives. These are places selling sturdily old stuff like tractors, livestock feed, fabrics for home-sewing, guns, photo album supplies, and donuts out on Transfat Boulevard.

Fifth, rurbia effects a thorough economic and social transformation. Whatever is left of the natural resource economy—which invariably was the economy that gave these places their post office listings in the first place—begins a rapid and terminal retreat.
Jobs in agriculture, jobs in the mines and the woods, the culture created by this kind of natural resource economy--rurbia simply wipes out whatever was left of it. With notable exceptions, local agriculture begins to seem like an elaborate hobby (as it truly is for some of the newcomers). Rurbia might leave a few old lumber mill smokestacks or retired teepee burners standing as sentimental monuments to the past, without noticing the irony that the still-living residents, who just a few years ago fed the fuel that caused the smoke that went up those stacks, can no longer afford to live in the old mill-town where the stacks now merely decorate the commerce of the day. Structures that were recently bread-and-butter to many residents--grain elevators are good examples--metamorphose into works of art.

Finally, rurbia, like every other artifact of the information age, is fast. It can be set in motion with the blinding speed of electronic capital transfers. And it can accrete with a deceivingly rapid movement toward market saturation. Just when residents of Central Oregon thought the golf industry could not possibly afford yet another resort, a group of local investors put the new Brasada Golf Resort on the fast track. It will be Crook County's first residential golf retreat, and it may indeed be the last in the region--the installation that achieves market saturation. And in fact, saturation of another kind has already begun to show up in rurban meccas: a form of saturation we might describe as too-much-of-a-good-thing. As a recent cover story in High Country News suggests, rurban growth in places like Bend is beginning to repel the original rurban 'pioneers.' The very thing that attracted them in the first place--the uncrowdedness of rural surroundings, the sense of the new discovery--turns out to be fugitive. As rurban regions grow, they begin to shed some of the earlier newcomers, who now want to move on to the Next Cool Place, like Daniel Boone hang-gliding his way over the next ridge.

For people living in rural places that suddenly become cool, that suddenly transform into something barely recognizable, rurbia often stirs up salty combinations of animosity and humor. Take, for example, the modern, state-of-the-art Pronghorn Golf Resort, located along a quiet county road that connects Bend and Prineville. It is a veritable sculpture carved out of the highly scenic Central Oregon landscape, which is dominated by conifer trees set against the dramatic backdrop of the Cascade Mountains. One of the dominant plants of Central Oregon is the Western juniper, a tree that thrives on the water- and soil-scarce ridgebacks and uplands of the dry country around Bend. Long the bane of cattlemen, loggers, and farmers, the Western juniper can develop enormous root systems that support the gnarled, twisted trunks of trees that can live, in extreme cases, up to two thousand years. The Western juniper, with no value as lumber and only modest value as firewood and fence posts, tends to thrive in logged areas and those grazed too heavily by livestock--but the twisted trunks and irregular crowns of these trees are often quite beautiful. Somehow they evoke a strong sense of ruggedness, westernness. For this reason, these very trees that are so hated by lumbermen and livestock producers are the featured stars of the Fazio/Nicklaus golf links at the new Pronghorn Resort. They are treated reverentially, like works of art, and at huge expense.

According to Crook County Judge Scott Cooper, "The Pronghorn designers, as part of their development, are out there transplanting full-grown juniper trees. We think that's hilarious around here because the junipers were always just something to be chopped down. They're water-hogs, nuisance plants--but Pronghorn has got specialized crews they brought up from Mexico that are digging up mature, live junipers and moving them to accentuate the views." In addition to digging up live junipers, Cooper explained, the landscaping crews sometimes move dead junipers to more scenic locations. But Cooper also realizes that what he is describing is an immensely lucrative design scheme, and he's quick to point out that no matter how funny the careful tending of juniper trees, live and dead, may be to long-term, hardened residents of Oregon timber country, the returns on Pronghorn corporation investments have been extraordinary. Cooper says that Pronghorn's initial offering of home-sites more than covered the company's bonded debt in the first two days of sales. "This was the biggest bonded debt in the history of Deschutes County," Cooper said. "Pronghorn wiped it out in around forty-eight hours."

Pronghorn is the latest of eight high-end golf resorts that have been built in Deschutes County, beginning in 1967 with the pioneering Sun River Resort, a 6,000-acre golf mecca at the south end of the county. As a neighboring county official, Scott Cooper is intensely aware of the impact such developments have on the local tax-base. The destination golf resorts in Deschutes County produce more tax revenue than all the rest of the industrial-commercial sector combined, according to Cooper. Moreover, the new resorts add only minimal burdens to county services. Says Cooper, "They contract for things like fire and police services--they don't just get these automatically. They offer second homes and vacation homes to a socio-demographic element that doesn't require a lot of governmental intervention. They don't have kids that go to the public schools and put a burden on your education infrastructure. They're just little cash cows. They make money and are low-impact. They don't even dilute your voter base, because nobody has a primary residence out there."

For these reasons--plus the promise of an expanded employment base--Cooper supported the recent application for a brand-new golf resort to be located near Prineville, the first of its kind in Crook County. Last year, the 1,200-acre Powell Butte Ranch was sold (with water rights) to the Eagle Crest Resort Corporation for a new destination resort to be named Brasada. Cooper says it, too, will be a posh and exclusive resort, along the lines of Pronghorn--and it will employ between four and six hundred people full time. "They'll get good wages and good benefits for relatively low-skill jobs," Cooper says. That's hard to beat in an economy like Prineville's, where there is little on the horizon to replace the hundreds of blue-collar jobs lost when timber collapsed.
What drives rurbia? Put as succinctly as possible: the Baby Boom generation. The decade of 2000 to 2010 will record a 50 percent increase in the population of Americans between the ages of forty-five and fifty-four. It's the biggest, richest generation in American history, and, arguably, the most self-indulgent. It is the generation with the largest well of disposable income in history. Baby Boomers stand to harvest $10.4 trillion in capital gains, equities, real estate assets, insurance, and inheritance. According to Jim Howe in Balancing Nature and Commerce in Gateway Communities, over the next two decades, "Boomers are expected to double the demand for recreational homes and resort lodging." If Howe is right, rurbia is just getting started. If the hallmark of post-World War II America was the suburb, the postmodern hallmark of the information age may be rurbia, the dispersed "rural city" of (often) second homes located in gorgeous, natural settings.

Adapted from a lecture Snow gave in Pendleton, Oregon, on May 19, 2006, for the Oregon Council for the Humanities as part of the Commonplace Lectures series. Published in the Fall/Winter 2006 issue of Oregon Humanities.

Some Ideas for Exhibits for the Virtual Museum of the City

Public squares
Origin of American cities
The city in history
The city as art
The history of individual cities
Exhibit reviews of books on urban affairs
Exhibit reviews of exhibits in city museums
Sustainability in American cities
Examples of noteworthy programs and projects
Sustainability from the perspectives of transit, bio-engineering, politics, etc.
What does a healthy city look like? (i.e., a city that promotes health and a healthy lifestyle)
Futurama, the 1939 World’s Fair
Farming the city (the return of agriculture to the city)
“Reading” the city (how to look at cities)
What does an iCity look like?
Robert Moses and Portland, Oregon
Edward Bennett and Portland, Oregon
Urban Learning: How Cities Learn ((see Stewart Brand’s How Buildings Learn))
Sidewalks (what makes them work? What’s their history? etc.)
The city perceived:
- the child and the city
- the physicist and the city
- the doctor and the city
- the engineer and the city
- the writer and the city
- the chemist and the city
- the lawyer and the city
- etc.

What makes a city?
City sounds
Markets
Imagined cities
Urban icons and what makes them iconic
Culinary cities
Religion and mythology and the city
Crime and the city
Great plans
Migration and cities
Gateway cities and cities’ gateways
Founding stories (Romulus and Remus, etc.)
“turnaround” cities (cities that have “recovered” and are doing well)

Or, suggest a topic