"Beautiful Downtown Burbank": Changing metropolitan geography in the modern West

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Introduction

In the half-century since World War II, observers of urban America have often looked to the Western United States for new patterns of city-making. American cities are changing, the common wisdom has said, and Western cities are getting there first.

The argument covers a wide range of urban developments. Western cities have been pioneers of the metropolitan-military complex. Southwestern cities and Pacific ports are leading the re-internationalization of the United States. Western cities, say the optimists, are the centers of cultural and political innovation. Yes, say the pessimists, but their most powerful innovations are new forms of social segregation and isolation.

The image of Western leadership has been particularly strong in writing about the changing geography of urban activities. The Eastern or Midwestern city of the 19th and early 20th century was easy to understand in terms of an intensely developed core surrounded by a lower density periphery. After World War II, however, it seemed that the suburbs were taking over from cities. “Decentralization” or “suburbanization” meant middle-class residents moving out of the old city, factories relocating to sites along the new beltway, and downtown department stores closing their doors while shoppers flocked to new super-regional malls. These trends were especially apparent in many metropolitan areas of the West, where city cores were relatively immature and easily overwhelmed by new development on the urban fringe.

Most often, urban experts found the future in California. The Association of American Geographers devoted a special 1959 issue of their scholarly journal to the thesis that greater Los Angeles “epitomizes the recent dominance of the city” in American society. San Diego journalist Neil Morgan in 1963 restated the 19th-century idea that exuberantly growing Western cities led the nation’s Westward tilt. Two years later, Fortune described Los Angeles as the “prototype of the super-city.” Richard Austin Smith found “a scaled-down, speeded-up version of the process of urbanization” and concluded that Los Angeles “may now be emerging as the forerunner of the urban world of tomorrow.”

Many found the prospect both intimidating and appalling. William H. Whyte offered Santa Clara County as the extreme of uncontrolled sprawl. Architectural critic Peter Blake used a photographic sequence on the construction of Lakewood, a new community in Los Angeles County, to illustrate the contribution of large-scale subdivisions to the spread of what he calls “God’s own junkyard.” A distinguished historian found Los Angeles a nebulous entity that remains “the least ‘legible’ of the great settlements of the world.” To an anonymous journalist it was “topless, bottomless, shapeless and endless . . . random, frenzied, rootless, and unplanned.” Its suburbs were “formless.” It was a “violently aggressive organism” with no pattern but “helterskelter” growth. As did Houston and Phoenix, it frequently attracted epithets like “noncity” and “nowhere city.”

Despite the attacks on smog-shrouded subdivisions and amoeboïd sprawl, the 1960s also brought growing attention to the idea that Western cities — complete with their cars and drive-ins — represented a new urban form that had to be judged on its own terms. Landscape historian John Brinckerhoff Jackson offered Lubbock and its car culture as the prototype for “up-to-date” American cities. Robert Riley similarly tested urban myths against the new cities of the Southwest. In Tucson, Albuquerque, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Odessa-Midland, and similar metropolitan areas, he found that the national processes of mobility and affluence were operating without an older urban fabric to get in the way. He argued,

It could even be that what we are seeing emerging is the third major stage of urban development — a post-industrial city as different from the industrial city as that city was from pre-industrial urban settlements.
New Shapes for the Metropolis

As the first step in examining this claim to Western leadership, I want to trace the Western roots and expressions of three competing ideas about the emerging form of decentralized cities: “urban realms,” “linear cities,” and a “go-board metropolis.” The second step is to consider some of the ways in which Western policymakers and planners have responded to new spatial patterns.

Geographer James Vance introduced the idea of urban realms in a study of the San Francisco Bay area in 1964. Ten years earlier, Vance had participated in influential Clark University studies to define precise downtown cores. After teaching at the University of California, he extrapolated a very different principle of urban form from his experience of the booming Bay Area. Urban realms were substantially self-sufficient subdistricts of the metropolis, such as the East Bay, South Bay, and San Francisco peninsula. They developed side by side with little social or economic connection. In each urban realm, hundreds of thousands or even millions of residents orbited around their own newly acquired concentrations of employment, retailing, and services. Like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, they assembled into a single metropolitan complex, but each piece was of essentially equal importance.

In 1971, British architect Reyner Banham offered a variation on Vance’s model in his book-length essay, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of the Four Ecologies.* Banham came to California with a fresh eye. He mixed traditional discussion of Los Angeles architects and buildings with the definition of subareas or “ecologies.” Where Vance’s realms were economic regions defined by measurable patterns of commuting and trade, Banham’s ecologies were cultural regions characterized by distinctive interactions between natural landscapes, architectural choices, and prevailing lifestyles. The four ecologies were the upscale neighborhoods of the foothills, the suburbanized valleys, the 70 miles of coastal “surfurbia,” and the Los Angeles freeway system itself.

Taken together, the work of Vance and Banham portrayed California as the home of a new style of metropolis—a loosely linked alliance of large, semi-independent urban regions that increasingly develop distinct “cultures” or social character. In the last two decades, it has
also been clear that urban realms subdivide and proliferate. Banham’s “valley” ecology now supports two very different social and cultural regions — the vast Hispanic-American realm of East L.A. and the quintessentially “American” San Fernando Valley. Orange County by the 1990s was dividing into an older, poorer, multi-ethnic north (Westminster-Fullerton-Garden Grove-Santa Ana) and a newer, richer, and strongly Anglo south (Newport Beach-Irvine-Costa Mesa-Mission Viejo). Vance’s East Bay realm has spawned a substantially independent “Contra Costapolis” inland from the Bay.

In the same years of the 1960s and 1970s, other observers and critics found a very different model for describing Western cities. The idea of linear cities had originated in Europe in the 1880s with Spanish designer Arturo Soria y Mata, who struggled to understand and utilize the effects of railroads on urban form. Versions were developed by Le Corbusier in the 1920s and Soviet planners in the 1930s. The idea of linear cities reappeared in the mid-century West as part of the effort to understand the effects of popular access to automobiles. In a linear city, activities are organized around a corridor of intense development, a downtown elongated from a point into a line.

A starting point is California science-fiction writer Robert Heinlein’s classic story, “The Roads Must Roll.” Writing in 1940, Heinlein used a West Coast setting to introduce the idea of “roadcities.” The story is set on and along the Diego-Reno roadtown, a vast moving highway that links the Los Angeles-Fresno-Stockton-Sacramento corridor and is lined with what we would now call commercial strip development. One of the subplots involves a visiting dignitary who is evaluating roadcities as an urban planning model for Australia.

Twenty-five years later, Christopher Rand summarized common thought with the suggestion that Los Angeles had a spine rather than a heart, commenting that it was “the Wilshire-Sunset axis . . . running below the mountains, that gives L.A. what form it has.” Wilshire Boulevard’s role as a major commercial corridor began in the 1930s, with early decentralization by retailers such as Bullock’s Department Store, and accelerated after World War II. By the 1960s, it was a 15-mile commercial strip periodically interrupted by high-rise clusters. “Axes like this,” Rand suggested, “may be an essential part of the anatomy, however dimly understood, of big cities now.”

Linearity is manifested even more blatantly in Las Vegas. At the same time that Banham was learning to drive the southern California freeways, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour were leading a
class of Yale architecture students through a seminar devoted to "Learning from Las Vegas." The resulting book defined Las Vegas as an extreme example of emerging urban form. The authors present Las Vegas as the cultural expression of the sunbelt Southwest — a New Florence to the New Rome of Los Angeles. Its central component is the commercial strip, a new main street where activities are announced by huge signs and connected by automobiles. Like Los Angeles, Las Vegas is a city designed around high speed, with spaces created by billboards and traffic signals rather than buildings.

Linear Las Vegas, in turn, leads back to New Mexico resident J. B. Jackson and his interpretation of Lubbock. His point is that what we learn from the Las Vegas strip is an exaggerated model for other cities built around the possibilities of the automobile. Throughout the Southwest, Jackson points out, highway strips are as old as the cities themselves. Residential areas fill in as repetitive, low-density units within the framework of thoroughfares. Lubbock and its sister cities tell us how the street, the road, the highway has taken the place of architecture as the basic visual element, the infrastructure of the city.

Denver is a case in point on the metropolitan scale. For a full century from the 1860s to the 1960s, Denverites built and rebuilt a single downtown on the same square mile at the original site of settlement. In the last three decades, however, "central" activities such as finance, corporate offices, and high-end retailing have broken out of the old downtown to scatter along a 20-mile length of Cherry Creek Boulevard, Colorado Boulevard, and Interstate 25, from downtown to the Denver Tech Center.

Another linear city stretches along California 17 and the Bay Area Rapid Transit line from Richmond through Berkeley, Oakland, San Leandro, Hayward, and Fremont, providing the structure for the East Bay urban realm.

The third model for understanding the morphology of Western cities is that of the go-board metropolis. Like chess and checkers, the Japanese game of go is played on a gridded board. Unlike the Western games, with their rigidly opposed sides and contested intermediate territory, go starts without any privileged position among its 361 squares. Nodes and clusters of activity can spring up at seemingly random locations, with patterns emerging from the complex mutual relationships among the counters that players place at intersection points on the board.

One of the most influential efforts to name and describe the multiple centers came from two Easterners transplanted to southern California. Writing in The Atlantic Monthly in 1986, Christopher Leinberger and Charles Lockwood repackaged academic discussion of "outer cities" for a general public, describing the "urban-village" cores that now give pattern to otherwise
low-density cityscapes. Their first and most compelling example is Los Angeles, a subject to which they returned in a second essay. They understand southern California as a sprawling settlement system pulled by the gravitational attraction of “village” centers — Ontario, Universal City/Burbank, and a dozen others.14

The idea of urban villages was very close to Robert Cervero’s definition of “sub-cities” as the most fully developed type of suburban activity center. Sub-cities are new outlying business districts that concentrate commercial space, office buildings, shopping malls, hotels, and convention facilities in a dense mixture of activities. Three-quarters of his examples are Western, including Warner Center north of Los Angeles and the South Coast Metro complex in Orange County.15

Leinberger, Lockwood, and Cervero were using the right examples, for the prototype for go-board metropolis was Los Angeles in the early 20th century. The metropolis evolved as a loosely knit set of separate communities arrayed in the territory around the core of Los Angeles proper. The common cliche was six (or 60) suburbs in search of a city. There were isolated neighborhoods at the end of streetcar routes, interurban lines, and newly paved highways; farm communities like Whittier; resort communities like Pasadena and Venice; and ambitious ports like Long Beach, Wilmington, and Santa Monica. “Black gold suburbs” developed around oil fields and other industrial activities. World War II brought new industrial communities as the major aircraft companies built their plants in a rough circle ten miles from the central business district — Lockheed in Burbank, Douglas in Santa Monica, North American near the airport and the new town of Westchester.16

Other Western cities have developed the same pattern in the years since 1960. A bird’s-eye view of Phoenix shows clusters of intense activity scattered across the cityscape, linked by a web of highways and surrounded by low-density neighborhoods. With seven “edge cities” in addition to downtown, and with the retirement city of Sun City, and several new suburban activity centers in the planning stages, a map of Phoenix resembles nothing more than the go board. The same is true of greater Houston, the Dallas-Fort Worth “Metroplex,” and Orange County, California. What appears at one scale as a relatively homogeneous urban realm resolves at closer study into dozens of discrete, substantial, and specialized centers and communities. The locations of the nodes are determined by their mutual “lateral” interactions, not by their relationship to a single dominant center.17

Real estate consultants and academicians have generated an entire sub-specialty of defining the subtypes among metropolitan nodes or mini-cities.18 For this discussion, we can differentiate between two basic types of activity centers outside the old central-city core. One is the fully planned new community. The other is the “uptown” — the alternative “downtown” developed incrementally by the private market. In turn, uptowns may be located within the boundaries of central cities (Houston’s Post Oak-Galleria or Phoenix’s Central Avenue...
and Biltmore-Camelback districts); in technically “suburban” districts (North Dallas Parkway, North San Antonio, Walnut Creek); or in older secondary cities that have been absorbed within the expanding metropolis and increasingly take their identity from new, specialized metropolitan roles (Pasadena, Boulder).  

Las Colinas near Dallas-Fort Worth Airport has been one of the most extensive efforts to plan a “new community.” Massive investment in infrastructure and amenities transformed a 19-square-mile ranch by adding a broad lake, canals, and plenty of carefully tended green space. Las Colinas reached half its projected work force of 100,000 by 1986. Its inventory of office space supposedly matched that of downtown Dallas in the 1950s. The neat and tidy environment has been especially attractive for corporate regional offices of firms like IBM, Xerox, DuPont, and AT&T. At the same time, most of the office workers commute from other suburbs; journalist John Louv has noted that Las Colinas has no street life or social life outside the athletic club and the carefully segregated shopping. In addition, the development went into receivership during the Texas real estate depression of the 1980s. The choice of entrepreneurs rather than “organization” persons has been the bustling chaos of the Golden Triangle area that has sprawled along the freeway loop in the north-Dallas suburbs.

The Las Colinas experiment is a step toward fully articulated satellite cities. The availability of large tracts of sparsely developed resource land in single or limited ownership near Western cities has made new towns relatively easy as real estate deals. The roots of Irvine, California, for example, date to the 1860s and 1870s, when James Irvine acquired title to several ranches in the southern portion of the future Orange County. The Irvine Company moved from agriculture to land development in the 1950s, leasing lots in expensive coastal subdivisions around Newport Bay. By 1960, the spread of Orange County suburbia was bringing frequent offers for other portions of the property. Rising property tax assessments that valued the ranch’s agricultural land at its potential for urban use were another pressure for urbanization. Between 1959 and 1964, architect William Periera and Irvine Company employees developed a plan for 40,000 acres between Newport Bay and the site for a new University of California campus. They envisioned a set of communities, each with a mix of housing, schools, and shopping centers. The residential communities would be linked to two major industrial sites and a Newport Center “downtown.” Large builders erected the first new housing on leased parcels, leaving the company in clear control of long-term development. Success in attracting upper-income residents in the 1960s led to a 1970 plan revision that divided 53,000 acres among 24 residential “villages.” Covering only part of the Irvine Company lands, the incorporated city of Irvine counted over 110,000 residents by 1990.

The Woodlands is another of the new-town experiences. George Mitchell, a futurist and energy king, viewed his development 15 miles north of Houston International Airport as a new kind of “cluster city.” Unlike Irvine, The Woodlands was designed to include low-income housing, in part to assure the guarantee of $50 million in development costs by the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Set among lakes and pine woods, the city presents a combination of small-town nostalgia and high-tech communications infrastructure. From initial design work in 1966 until 1975, its future was in doubt because of lagging demand for housing, lax internal management, and the inability of HUD to deliver on its commitment. Corporate reorganization, the Houston energy boom of the latter 1970s, and George Mitchell’s own money rescued the Woodlands Development Corporation.

Perhaps the most fully articulated uptown is Post Oak-Galleria. Although Houston boosters like to claim the district as the ninth or tenth largest “downtown” in the United States, it offers few reminders of historic city centers. It takes many of the elements of a downtown but spreads them over four or five times the space. A 64-story Transco Tower sits in a sea of parking near an interchange of West Loop 610. The huge Galleria shopping mall, opened in 1970 and later doubled in size, is one of the largest on the continent. A population of daytime workers that tops 75,000 fills isolated clusters of high-rise offices and hotels. A few of the pieces are connected by pedestrian walkways (but not sidewalks). Most are tied together only by automobile. The same is true of similar clumps of activity on the north sides of San Antonio, Austin, and Dallas.

Planning for the Multicentric Metropolis

The political or policy adjustment to the multicentric metropolis may well be more effective in the West than elsewhere. The region’s institutional openness has allowed Western cities to better adapt their political structures and organizational responses to the new realities of social and economic geography. The suburban West, on the average, is served by stronger, more comprehensive governments than the suburbs of the East. Moreover, the realities of political influence in Western metropolitan areas clearly reflect the outward shift of economic power and the rise of functionally independent suburban realms. In several metropolitan areas, innovative plans attempt to combine the virtues of density with the centrifugal tendencies of contemporary growth by promoting sets of semi-independent activity centers as public policy.

General descriptions of governmental organization within American metropolitan areas commonly stress the fragmentation of their suburban rings among scores or hundreds of cities, towns, special districts, and other taxing units. The Eastern model is captured by the title of Robert Wood’s book about metropolitan New York — 1400 Governments. Chicago and St. Louis are other
commonly cited examples of hyper-fragmentation. Small suburban governments protect specific land uses (both residential communities and industrial enclaves) and defend distinct lifestyles by controlling social access. Although small suburban governments have developed a wide range of techniques for protecting community identity and status, they have limited capacity for public entrepreneurship. They lack the interest and ability to promote economic growth or to develop major public facilities.22

In contrast, a substantial portion of Western “metropolis” live in a handful of large suburbs that can be complete service providers. Municipal management specialists generally agree that 50,000 is the threshold population to support a comprehensive set of public services, employ a diversified professional staff, and realize economies of scale in service delivery.23 Table 1 measures the overall importance of large suburbs by indicating the proportion of metropolitan population in suburbs of 50,000 or more. It includes the six Western metropolitan areas in which at least 25 percent of the residents lived outside the core city or cities but within 50,000+ municipalities in 1990. The communities included are places like Sunnyvale and Berkeley, Escondido and Chula Vista, Mesa and Scottsdale, Lakewood and Boulder.

A more exacting measure of suburban governmental self-sufficiency is to define as “super-suburbs” those municipalities with populations of at least 100,000, that are not named as a central city for a metropolitan area. In 1960, there were six such super-suburbs in the Western states and six in the Eastern states. By 1980, the number in the West had quadrupled to 24 compared to 11 in the East. By the 1990 census, the figures were 39 for the West and 16 for the East (a change in West:East ratio from 1:1 to 2.44:1).

The frequent occurrence of large-scale, comprehensive government in the suburban rings of Western metropolitan areas has helped to tilt the balance of political power toward the same suburban areas. During the first two decades after World War II, downtown-based and central-city-oriented elites controlled local decisions in most Western metropolitan areas. During the 1970s and 1980s, however, outlying municipalities were able to push their own development agendas in direct competition with central cities. In effect, ambitious suburbs have tried to accelerate the evolution of separate urban realms as a deliberate policy strategy.24

Aurora, Colorado, is a case in point. Since the 1960s, Aurora has dealt with Denver as an equal. The city invested heavily in infrastructure for economic growth, including a joint water supply system with Colorado Springs that frees Aurora of its dependence on the trans-mountain pipelines of the Denver Water Board. The city has marketed itself as an office and industrial location, absorbed new ethnic populations, and annexed aggressively at the same time that state law largely locked Den-

ver within its boundaries. Paul Tauer, elected mayor in 1987, anticipated a future in which Denver and Aurora would be recognized as twin cities, with Denver in the role of slower growing St. Paul and Aurora in the role of Minneapolis.25

Located across Lake Washington from Seattle, downtown Bellevue offers another example of self-conscious suburban strategy, centered in this case by planning to assure a better-designed alternative to auto-based suburbs with their often unrelated pieces of showoff architecture. Only two bridges link the fast-growing eastern suburbs of King County to Seattle, giving Bellevue an enormous advantage in accessibility. Beginning in the late 1970s, Bellevue faced a proposed freeway shopping mall and a volley of scattershot office development that threatened to disrupt the city’s neighborhoods. The policy response was to zone for a high-rise core that could become the major activity center on the Eastside. The Bellevue plan is notable for the urbanism of its design guidelines. New office towers have to pass design review and build to the sidewalk rather than cowering behind parking lots. A new retail center and a transit terminal anchor the ends of a pedestrian axis. The goal is a suburban center that offers the intensity and critical mass of a traditional downtown.26

In metropolitan Phoenix, “Los Angeles-like urban sprawl resulted in the creation of multiple power centers throughout the Salt River Valley” from the late 1960s.27 Peripheral development created new, localized sets of business and investment interests different from those of the postwar civic leadership. New centers with their own groups of economic and civic leaders included the independent suburbs of Scottsdale, Glendale, and Mesa-Tempe-Chandler, and the growing northwest and Bilt-
Consolidated metropolitan areas. Fort Worth labors under the shadow of Dallas, Tacoma captures maritime trade from Seattle, and Vancouver searches for ways to attract upper-end business from Portland. San Jose trumpets its new standing as the largest city in northern California. No longer the prototype of the suburbanized city, San Jose in the 1980s decided to spend $1 billion of public money (leveraging a comparable private investment) to manufacture a downtown that matched its regional pretensions. The pieces have included a convention center, performing arts center, museums, new and restored hotels, open-air retail pavilion, plaza, park, housing, and a light rail line. Some of the signs on construction sites read "San Jose is growing up." With a new downtown, says one politician, "nothing can stop us to rival, ultimately, Paris, London, Zurich, all the great communities." 29

On a smaller scale, older suburban activity centers that find themselves caught between revitalizing downtowns and the newest peripheral development have responded by strengthening their urban characteristics. From Burbank, Sunnyvale, and Mountain View in California to Federal Way, Washington, planners and city officials follow the lead of San Jose, imitating older downtowns because residents want city centers for convenience and for civic identity. "People want to have some civic pride, some community image," said a Sunnyvale official. "They want a place they can point to and say — This is where I live." 30

Balancing the ambitions of individual cities are ongoing regional efforts to reconcile the go-board morphology with the principles of "good planning" — compact, efficient in use of infrastructure, supportive of public transportation. Such efforts are seen in regional greenbelt/satellite city planning and in plans for restructuring large core cities around multiple centers.

Both Seattle and Portland are working toward a set of regional growth poles. Puget Sound Council of Governments in 1990 planned for an anticipated 1.4 million new jobs for the Seattle-Tacoma Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area by adopting a regional growth and transportation strategy called VISION 2020. The document elaborated and refined well-publicized suggestions by journalist Neal Peirce that Seattle develop a greenbelt/growth-pole strategy. VISION 2020 calls for "a regional system of central places framed by open space," concentrating new jobs and housing in central Seattle, in the metropolitan cities of Bellevue, Bremerton, Everett, Renton, and Tacoma, and in subregional centers along transit corridors. Metro, the regional planning and service agency for Portland, engaged in a similar "Region 2040" process in the mid-1990s. As of mid-1994, the most popular alternative combined intensified development downtown, along light rail lines, and in three satellite cities. Separated from the metropolitan core by farm and forest land, the satellites are projected for populations of 50,000 to 75,000. 31
Finally, the "centers" strategies of Phoenix and Seattle are attempts to capture some of the benefits and dynamics of suburban-style clustering within the boundaries of large central cities. The 1979 "Phoenix Concept Plan 2000" called for the enhancement of nine urban villages centered on major shopping centers and uptown office clusters. Originating with a citizens' committee in the 1970s, the plan generated considerable enthusiasm, for it seemed to guide the growth of the city while ratifying the multicentric trend. The General Plan of 1985 incorporated the Concept 2000 idea. Each of nine (later eleven) villages was to be "relatively self-sufficient in providing living, working, and recreational opportunities" with the city encouraging concentration of employment and services in the cores. In 1989-1990, a new set of citizen discussions allowed the city to refine the Urban Village Concept into a new Urban Village Model. Each village is described as a substantially self-sufficient economic unit organized around a high-intensity core that serves as a downtown and creates a physical identity for the village.

In 1990, Mayor Norman Rice introduced the same idea to Seattle. He called on Seattle's notoriously no-growth voters to consider capturing a share of new regional growth in tightly defined urban villages. The proposal evolved into a pending Comprehensive Plan that defined five "urban centers" that would absorb 30,000 households and 100,000 jobs as well as smaller "hub-urban villages" to pick up further development. As in Phoenix, centers and villages are to be multifunctional communities that cluster employment and services in high-intensity, mixed-use cores.

Conclusion
The multicentered metropolis is not unique to the West. By the 1990s, Fairfax County, Virginia, and Long Island were urban realms just as much as North Dallas and southern Orange County. Miami, Fort Lauderdale, and Coral Gables were analogous to Seattle, Tacoma, and Bellevue. Southeastern Virginia was a go-board region completely partitioned among seven rival cities with populations ranging from 52,000 to 393,000.

Nevertheless, Western cities have been in the forefront of the multicentric trend. Architectural historian Robert Bruegmann calls suburban activity centers in Dallas "grander in scale and further out for the size of the city than anything anywhere else in the country." Robert Cervero has the similar opinion that "the Houston area probably has the largest number of widely
dispersed activity centers of any major city in the world.” A battalion of social scientists offer Orange County as the model for the “post-suburban” or “networked” metropolis.

These critics understand that the lightly developed landscapes that surround most Western cities offer few impediments to the growth of independent outlying centers. In such widely spreading Western cityscapes, Houston area probably has the largest number of widely dispersed activity centers of any major city in the world.” A battalion of social scientists offer Orange County as the model for the “postsuburban” or “net Americans have been especially likely to create order by building new and independent nuclei to serve as alternatives to older city centers. The spatial structure of the city itself presents no arguments against placing one more casino at the end of the strip or one more subdivision beyond the last. As Western cities have followed this new logic of growth, linear development has been a halfway house between unicentric and multicentric forms. In cases such as Los Angeles, the East Bay, and Denver, activity corridors link old and new cityscapes by extending from a historic downtown into the periphery. The more fully realized new pattern is a metropolis of vast urban realms that are themselves comprised of networks of activity centers.

Despite the economic momentum of dispersal, public actions in the last generation have worked to counter the fragmentation implied by proliferating centers. The predominant go-board metropolis in the West frequently supports comprehensive suburban governments rather than governmental chaos. Leading regional planning efforts emphasize the interdependence of multiple centers as parts of urban systems. New cities flatten the old by creating downtowns on the model of older central cities. Ironically, the most successful new mall in Southern California in the 1990s is CityWalk, a $100 million project that opened in the Universal City- Burbank edge city in 1993. Its claim to fame is its imitation of a “natural” downtown.

Over the last century and a half, American cities have shown a repeated dynamic of rapid outward growth followed by slow integration of new development into expanded metropolitan communities. Peripheral communities have gained social and functional variety and gradually accepted economic and governmental ties to other parts of the metropolis in a sort of urban-regional diplomacy. In other words, we have tended to suburbanize first and to urbanize later. The evidence in this essay suggests that the same dynamic may be repeating itself in the American West in the closing decades of the 20th century. Since World War II, Westerners have pioneered the creation of multicentered metropolitan regions. In the last two decades, they have also begun to experiment with new ways to organize and integrate urban development on a regional scale. By innovating new forms of metropolitan growth, in the long view, Western cities remain pioneers, amplifying and extending the logic of the American urban tradition.

NOTES
By Steven F. Mehls, Carol J. Drake, and James Daniel Elazar, indeed, there is a positive association between metropolitan fragmentation and the goals of the good life. For example, the Phoenix, Denver, and Seattle examples that followed the Phoenix: the history of a southwestern metropolis (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), 267.


Cervero, America's Suburban Centers, 185.


Indeed, there is a positive association between metropolitan fragmentation and economic decline of central cities.


In addition to the Phoenix, Denver, and Seattle examples that follow, Los Angeles is fertile ground for suburban growth agendas. Pasadena and Long Beach are two cities that lie within the Los Angeles orbit but have long cultivated separate identities and ambitions.

Steven F. Mehls, Carol J. Drake, and James E. Fell, Jr., Aurora: Gateway to the Rockies (Evergreen, CO: Cordillere, 1985); Stephen J. Leonard and Thomas J. Noel, Mining, Mining Metropolis (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1990), 350-358. On the other side of Denver, Arvada is another suburban that adopted a vigorous expansion policy coupled with efforts to build a strong community identity.


G. Wesley Johnson, "Generations of Elites and Social Change in Phoenix," in Jessie Embry and Howard Christy, eds., Community Development in the American West (Provo, UT: Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, Brigham Young University, 1985), 99.


Cervero, America's Suburban Centers, 185.
