



Image from: [Among Mexico City's most pressing challenges are... in Green Cities: An A-to-Z Guide](#)

Summary Article: **city**

From *The Dictionary of Human Geography*

The etymological roots of the term lie in the Latin *civitas*; it is related to the Greek *polis*, the Latin *urbs*, the French *la cite*, *la ville*, the Italian *la città* and the German *die Stadt*. Today, a more generic usage of the term refers to an urban demographic, economic and above all political and jurisdictional unit, usually bigger than a town. In the USA, cities are considered to have self-government granted by the states. In Canada, where municipal autonomy is more restricted, cities are under the constitutional jurisdiction of provinces. In the UK, reference is to a large town that has received title from the Crown.

Cities are usually trading centres and marketplaces. Their emergence is linked to the historical separation of non-agricultural work from the land (see urban origins). Ancient cities in the Indus valley, in Mesopotamia, Egypt and China were based on a hydrological agricultural economy, and were the seats of religious and military power, and the state. The built environment developed around a temple or ziggurat, and was walled for defence and internal control of the population. In ancient Greece and Rome, city-states (Athens, Rome) were cores of larger empires (Mumford, 1961; Benevolo, 1980). Medieval cities in Europe are often seen as the Western archetype of urban socio-spatial organization and the core of an urban-based network of trade systems (e.g. the German *Hansa*). During that period, cities were municipal corporations of free citizens embedded in – usually feudal – larger territorial units. Cities were seats of church power and of the emerging bourgeoisie, as well as the tightly organized artisan trades. Many cities became the location of the first universities.

Today's most common image of cities is influenced by the industrial age. The industrial revolution led to the large-scale demographic concentration of working-class populations around manufacturing plants or industrial complexes, and housed in the typical tenement and rowhouse settlements of the nineteenth-century city. Industrial core regions such as the British Midlands or the German Ruhr area became sites of rapid urbanization, creating regional agglomerations of industrial cities. In the USA, Chicago stands in as the prototypical industrial city that grew explosively around the turn of the twentieth century.

Improved transportation allowed longer commuter distances and suburbanization at the beginning of the twentieth century. The planned suburbanization and automobilization, as well as functional separation of land uses in particular, were ultimately considered a major contributor to the 'fall' of the modern city (Jacobs, 1992 [1961]; see suburb). The twentieth century saw metropolitanization and the rise of the megalopolis, a supercity stretching across several urban areas. City life now encompasses most areas of society as 'urbanism as a way of life' (see urbanism) becomes pervasive. post-industrial cities now characterize most Western nations, as industries first moved to suburban locations and then to developing countries where – as in Korea, Brazil or China – renewed waves of urbanization and industrialization seem to repeat the history of the industrial city in Europe and North America.

In the global south, cities have often grown from colonial outposts into global trading centres (Hong Kong and Singapore). In Africa, Asia and Latin America today, cities grow dramatically, often largely on the basis of large-scale squatter settlements (see squatting) and informal urbanization. Cities have recently enjoyed renewed attention as a post-Westphalian system of global governance has

restructured the role of nation-states, and as new types of global cities and megacities have begun to exert territorial, economic and political power at a global scale.

The city has been the object of much scholarly debate in geography and the social sciences. As David Harvey (1973, p. 196) has noted: 'Urbanism may be regarded as a particular form or patterning of the social process. This process unfolds in a spatially structured environment created by man [sic]. The city can therefore be regarded as a tangible, built environment – an environment which is a social product.' Urban theory of the twentieth century, strongly influenced by the work of German sociologist Max Weber (1958 [1921]) and the Chicago school of sociology (Park, Burgess and McKenzie, 1925; Wirth, 1938), tended to fetishize the city spatially as something that appeared distinct from society. Neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian critiques led to a new phase of studying the city in the 1960s and 1970s (Castells, 1972; Harvey, 1973; Smith, 1979b; Saunders, 1986; Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]), pointing to the notion that the modern city is an economic or administrative part of capitalist society and cannot be studied in separation from it. Castells influentially defined the city as the site of collective consumption and a site for social movement mobilization (Castells, 1972, 1983). A related strand of thought redefined the city as a product of urban growth machines and governing regimes interested in the increase in property values (Logan and Molotch, 1987). Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s 'the city' often became synonymous with the site of social crisis, pathology and delinquency, the postmodern turn in geography and urban studies reinvigorated the discussion on the city in the 1990s, as Los Angeles was temporarily viewed as the new 'Chicago': a distinct and pervasive model of urbanization in a globalized capitalist system (Scott and Soja, 1996; Dear, 2002; see postmodernism). As China's cities grow in size and significance as global players, they have become the focus of increased attention at the beginning of the twenty-first century, while the sprawling megacities of the global South are considered to be on a trajectory different from the ones in the West and in the North.

Although the death of the city had been predicted as a consequence of the development of transportation and information technologies that allegedly make agglomeration less necessary and less likely, the opposite has occurred in the past decade: economic power has been re-concentrated in cities as a new wave of re-centralization of people and economic activities has led to a 'fifth migration' to urban centres (Fishman, 2005). Much of this had to do with a distinct process of 'metropolitanization', a state growth strategy that concentrates specifically on cities. As a consequence, cities have been rediscovered as the site of 'creative industries', but also as the contested space of social struggles, gentrification and displacement.

Suggested reading

Full bibliography is available [here](#).

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