

How Racism Made the American Metropolis Unsustainable

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In general, American cities are distended, dysfunctional metropolises, riven apart by racial and socioeconomic inequalities; local and global environments are quickly degrading, with the threat of cataclysmic climate change increasing by the day. These two issues—racial inequality and environmental sustainability—may not seem directly related, but they are inextricably bound together. This project is about how the environment has shaped race in the modern American city, how race has shaped the urban environment, and the dire consequences of both processes.

The path towards sustainability for American cities—creating places that are much less dependent on fossil fuels but can still provide economic and environmental security and justice for all their residents—is relatively straightforward. Metropolitan areas need to become denser, with more apartments, smaller residences, and social housing options that will provide safe, economical dwellings that are easier to heat and cool. This will also help make mass transit, as well as walking and cycling, cheaper to provide and more attractive to residents, which will significantly lessen dependence on fossil fuels. These solutions are well known to policy experts and are taught in college classrooms every year. What is not generally understood is that the primary hurdle to the adoption of these and many of other sustainability policies is not gridlock politics, climate-change denialism, or difficulties with technology transition. The fundamental obstacle to American urban sustainability is race. Over the course of the twentieth century, racism has driven suburbanization and white flight, disinvestment from public transportation and dependence on gasoline-powered automobiles, environmental inequality, and the austerity-driven decay of water and sewer infrastructure.

This project will examine the relationship between the racialization of metropolitan space and environmental change in the United States over the past century, with a focus on the 1960s to the present. After the legal and legislative victories of the Civil Rights Movement, institutional and structural racism did not end in the United States. It shifted, and, in particular, was spatialized in new and important ways. National and local policies that had encouraged suburbanization and urban disinvestment for decades continued into the 1970s and beyond and morphed, further mapping racial hierarchies onto the American metropolis. Minority groups and civil rights advocates challenged these practices and policies both in the courts and on the ground, but vigorous defense of these inequalities continued to racialize housing markets, with a general fear of the racial “other” becoming a key driver of energy-intensive urban sprawl. Suburban whites saw any attempt to encourage density, bring in public transit, or even conduct regional planning, as something that would urbanize their communities and attract low-income minority residents and “urban problems.” In many cities, suburban land-use politics has become primarily about defending whiteness, which furthers sprawl and exacerbates environmental inequalities. Overall, this project shows how the histories of racial inequality and environmental sustainability in the American metropolis are not just loosely connected, but thoroughly entangled.