

Race, Sprawl and Sustainability: How the American Way of City Building is Killing the Planet
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American suburbs are killing the planet. Across the United States, the most energy intensive neighborhoods with the largest carbon footprints are suburban, particularly the fast-growing “exurban” communities on the fringes of the metropolis. Many have per-household carbon loads that are double or even triple communities at the center of major cities. Dig deeper and you can see why. The American suburb is a distinct low-rise residential development, made up primarily of single-family homes, where the automobile is the sole means of transportation. In many suburbs, it is virtually impossible to get anywhere without a car. Why are things this way? The short answer, is race.

After the civil rights revolutions of the 1960s, a new racial regime emerged across the metropolitan landscape. With explicit forms of racist discrimination no longer legal, American whites began using zoning and development restrictions and transit planning to control who could live and access their communities. Many restrictions worked, creating fortified islands of whiteness, but others did not, and Black and Latinx city residents were able to gain access to certain suburbs beginning in the 1970s. In response, many whites left these neighborhoods, providing an ever-growing market for residential development farther into the exurbs. The result has been the ever-expanding American metropolis, where the only two constant features are massive fossil-fuel dependency and racial segregation. *Race, Sprawl and Sustainability* tells the story of how Americans created these cities, shows how two of the biggest issues the country faces today—racial inequality and climate change—are entangled, and explains why they must be addressed in tandem to create a sustainable and just society.

This project is about how the “city” and different forms of infrastructure essential for urban sustainability, especially apartment buildings, buses and subway lines, but also bicycle lanes, sidewalks, and parks, became racialized in very specific ways. In particular, it shows how the simultaneous racialization of housing and mobility is vital for understanding the American metropolis, and especially the suburb, as a particular type of energy intensive system locked into fossil fuel use since the 1960s.