

URbanization

# FROM GARDEN TO CITY: URBANIZATION[[1]](#footnote--1)

## A. Introduction[[2]](#footnote-0)

1. It is important to distinguish between urban centres or cities on the one hand, and the process of urbanization on the other. While cities have a relatively long history of some 5,000 years, urbanization in its current sweeping form is a recent phenomenon.

2. While there is historical continuity in urban development, there are also major changes in urban experience which correspond to historical advances such as the industrial revolution.

3. The process of urbanization is perhaps the single most significant factor in human development in the last millennium, and yet the great part of it has taken place within the last 150 years.

## B. The Strategic Importance of The City

### 1. Cities: Focus of Power, Wealth and Culture

The world has always been made up of city-states with vast swathes of untamed and violent lands between them. The concept of nation states over the last three centuries has been an interlude that is now returning to the city-state model.

(1) Cities are a progression from poverty to affluence - from rural destitution to integrated mega-centres of wealth.

(2) Cities are engines of social, political and cultural change.

### 2. Today Urban-Dwellers Make up the Majority

The greatest migration in history has been occurring this century. By A.D.2000, 51% of the world will be urban. The majority of these will be urban poor.

There are 433 mega-cities over 1 million, 6,000 over 100,000 population, 12,000 cities globally. Growth is roughly 1/2 from births in the city, and ½ from migration. Both factors affect our evangelistic strategies. How the church reacts to the changing city determines the future.

## C. The Development of Cities[[3]](#footnote-1)

### 1. From Nomadic to Village Life

Early patterns of human life were determined very much by the basics of survival. Food was obtained by hunting, and the practicalities of hunting meant a nomadic lifestyle. The needs for safety and procreation resulted in tribal structures. There were ‘hunting grounds’; broad geographical areas in which tribes moved, but as yet no fixed settlements. The seeds of a more fixed communal living may have been present in the development of common burial sites which were associated with a particular tribe. Mumford points to the significance of ceremonial meeting places where family or clan groups would gather at certain intervals, and which became ‘sacred’ places. He notes that long before the settled city became a reality, expression was being given to a human need for a meeting place:

But note that two of the three original aspects of temporary settlement have to do with sacred things, not just with physical survival. They relate to a more valuable and meaningful kind of life, with a consciousness that entertains past and future, apprehending the primal mystery of sexual generation and the ultimate mystery of death and what may lie beyond death... In the earliest gathering about a grave or a painted symbol a great stone or a sacred grove, one has the beginning of a succession of civic institutions that range from the temple to the astronomical observatory, from the theater to the university (Mumford 1961:9).[[4]](#footnote-2)

The arrival of the hamlet or village was dependent on a source of food other than the fresh meat from hunting. Perhaps 6,000 years ago the first settlements were formed around coastal areas, based on an economy of fish and other seafood. At about the same time hamlets appear, containing clearings for crops such as tubers, and the rearing of domestic animals. It is the development of agriculture which makes the village a possibility. This is not the last time when discoveries which influence the natural environment will change the patterns of human community. Between ten and twelve thousand years ago, village life again moved forward with the cultivation of grass and other seed plants, and the domestication of herd animals.

With the change from nomadic life there were alterations to the fabric of human society. Permanence of residence meant that skills other than those of hunting became valued, and so status and roles within the former tribal structure underwent transition. It appears that the fixed food supply and the greater security of village life occasioned increased fertility and a consequent advance in population. Also settled existence meant that a more intentional approach could be taken to human life, which was not now so dependent on the capriciousness of nature.

Mumford suggests that in a village life nurturing skills possessed by women were recognised as highly significant, and the culture was more matriarchal. In time however the hunters discovered a new pastime, that of military aggression, and so created a new process which was to dominate the villages.

### 2. The Emergence of the City

The transformation of the village into the city was not the result of simply increasing numbers. A city is not just a large village; it constitutes a whole new social process. The determinative factor in the emergence of cities was the evolution of the former protective hunter into the tribute-gathering chief The hunter became the warrior; hunting implements became weapons; the villages became exploited by this new aggressive class. Eventually, the warrior-chief became the king, and at this point the earliest cities or citadels (little cities) came into existence. This was at some time before 3,000 BC.

The citadel was the dwelling place of the king, surrounded by a wall. It was not simply a fortified village, but a place from which the king controlled the surrounding region and its villages. From this centre the king made raids, seized crops, conscripted labour and collected taxes. Allied with his military power, the king developed an aura of religious power; the king was a divine figure, the son of God. The dwelling place of the king was also sacred, and this had a magnetic effect in drawing people into and around the citadel. Together with the king's enslavement of surrounding villagers, the gathering of many different types of people into a geographical area, all under the one central authority, led to a new social structure which we now know as the city.

From its very earliest stages in Mesopotamia, the city draws and integrates many different categories of people, influences the surrounding geographical area, and creates a complex social organism with fixed lines of authority. It also enables a great step forward in human technical progress. Building, science, art and even agriculture blossom with the increased human resources and centralisation created by the city. An important development associated with cities is writing, and many of the earliest records are the annals of the king. Such early cities were not large by present standards; the biggest contained perhaps 30,000 people.

### 3. The Development of Cities

Cities grew to have a controlling influence over the civilised world. All great empires were all founded on cities, which were both the dwelling place of the Emperor and the centres of power and trade. Around 700 BC, the cities of Greece began to grow according to a different and more democratic pattern. It is worth noting, however, that this democracy and the worth of the citizen was built upon the institution of slavery. The focus of urban life shifted to the Mediterranean, and reached a kind of apex in Rome where by the time of Paul the population was almost one million. As trade and shipping became more important, cities based on ports grew in significance. Urban centres with ports such as London and Amsterdam took the lead as cities of prominence in the fourteenth century.

By far the greatest factor to influence the development of cities was the industrial revolution. This was to change the role and scope of cities within human society, and to begin a process of urbanization which has been relentless.

## D. The Accelerating Process

It is estimated that as late as 1850, only 2% of the world's population lived in cities of more than 100,000 people. In 1900, 232 million, or 14% of people lived in cities. By the year 2000, it is suggested that 51% of the world's population will live in urban areas. The roots of this massive migration lie in the nineteenth century.

### 1. The Industrial Revolution

Mumford summarises the contributing factors of the industrial revolution which fuelled urbanization:

The political base of this new type of urban aggregation rested on three main pillars... the abolition of the guilds and the creation of a state of permanent insecurity for the working classes, the establishment of the competitive open market for labour and for the sale of goods; the maintenance of foreign dependencies as sources of raw materials, necessary to new industries, and as a ready market to absorb the surplus of mechanised industry. Its economic foundations were the exploitation of the coal mine, the vastly increased production of iron, and the use of a steady reliable - if highly inefficient - source of mechanical power; the steam engine (Mumford 1961: 447).'

With the coincidence of these forces, the great industrial urban centres were born. The steam engine worked most efficiently in huge concentrated units, with vast workshops built around the steaming heart of the boiler. The new factories consumed coal and workers with equal voracity. Clusters of factories serving a common industry grew up and formed the centre of a new industrial town. These cities grew so rapidly that there was often no provision of basic services until much later. The factory formed the nucleus of the city and dominated all its affairs. Cheap labour was readily available in the surrounding rural areas and was drawn magnetically to the booming cities.

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it. and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of buildings full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness.

...........Charles Dickens describes Coketown, in Hard Times, 1854

One direct result of this influx was the creation of slums. Housing for the new population did not exist. What were formerly one-family houses now had one family to each room. The new dwellings built were often 'rent-barracks', producing severe overcrowding and foul living conditions. A report from Manchester in 1845 notes that in one part of the city 700 residents shared the use of just 33 toilets.

This dirt and congestion, bad in themselves, brought other pests, the rats that carried bubonic plague, the bedbugs that infested the beds and tormented sleep, the lice that spread typhus, the flies that visited impartially the cellar privy and the infant's food. Moreover the combination of dark rooms and dank walls formed an almost ideal breeding medium for bacteria especially since the overcrowded rooms afforded the maximum possibilities of transmission through breath and touch (Mumford 1961:462).

The Industrial Revolution triggered the process of urbanization in Britain, Europe, and the United States. In the new urban centres, the significant factor was not the military and political power of a monarch, but the all-consuming power of the capitalist economy. The growth of certain major port cities was phenomenal. London's population expanded from 1.3 million in 1815 to 4 million in 1870. In such cities, much of the next century was spent dealing with the social and logistical problems they had inherited. Housing, transport, sanitation, health and policing systems all had to be developed to respond to the massive inward migration. Many patterns and norms of human life had been changed in a fundamental way by the demands of the new urban environment.

### 2. The New Wave

Most cities created by the Industrial Revolution peaked in their growth around the end of the nineteenth century. This did not mean the end of urbanization, however, but simply a shift in its focus. The front line of urban expansion is now to be found in Asia and the Third World. In many cities of Latin America, Africa, Asia and India, growth is explosive. The population of Mexico City is increasing by a million people each year - 60O,000 by birth and 400,000 by migration. It contains a quarter of the entire population of the country, and by 1995 is expected to reach a size of 25 million. Bangkok grows by 750,000 people each year, with the majority of the new residents living in slums. In Latin America, 64% of the population now lives in cities.

There are different characteristics to the phenomenon of urbanization in the Third World. In the West, the process was driven by industrialisation and the demand for labour, and so new city-dwellers could be sure of a job. But the driving force for urbanization in the Third World is massive population growth due to high birth rates. Urban life looks attractive from a perspective of rural poverty, and millions of young people migrate to the cities each year. Though such cities are exploited by the developed world for cheap labour, there are nowhere near enough jobs available for the population. In Africa, there is widespread destruction of family life as men move into the cities in search of work, leaving wives and children on tribal land. But 25% of them find no job.

The result is burgeoning cities characterised by extreme poverty, with new slums being created each year. These cities are even less able to cope with such rapid growth than were the centres of the Industrial Revolution, and all the consequent problems of sanitation, housing, disease and pollution are recreated. There is a ready climate for racial and religious violence in such urban furnaces.

### 3. The Process of Urbanization

Urbanization refers not only to the physical growth of cities, and the number of people now residing within them. It also encompassed the growth in influence of urban centres, and the effect of cities on human existence.

### i. Urban Regions

Growing cities have an impact far beyond their internal life. They have certain needs which cannot be met from their own resources. One of the major needs is food. For the most part, this must be produced outside of the city environs, in the surrounding region. The market and purchasing power of the city is so great that it will determine what food is grown and what price it will fetch. This economic power means that the life of the farmer is directly influenced by the nearest urban centre. Cities need electricity, and so the countryside will be developed in whatever way is necessary to provide this. Rivers may be dammed to provide a steady water supply for the city. In these and many other ways cities dominate the lives of those who live in surrounding regions.

### ii. Cultural Influence

With the advent of modern communication, and in particular television, the culture of rural life is invaded by urban values. Television stations are invariably located in cities, and reflect by and large the mores of the urban dwellers. Young people in country areas gain aspirations and expectations which can never be met in the rural environment, and so many migrate to the cities as soon as they are able. Those who remain have their values shaped by the steady stream of information and entertainment being beamed into their homes. So even those who have never lived in a city become participants in the urban culture.

### iii. The Shift in Power

In urbanised societies, political power shifts inevitably from the farming district to the urban centres. In our own situation, we can see this process at work. In earlier times, the rural vote was determinative, and the National Party held office almost as of right. The economy was geared toward supporting farmers, ‘the backbone of the country’. Now the regions are left to languish while the major focus is on the cities. Politicians know that the centre of power has shifted, and from now on the urban vote will carry elections. Urbanization brings with it the establishment of political power in the cities, and thus an urban shape to national policy.

1. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Supplementary Reading: This lecture summarises Chaps 1-6 in ***Cry of the Urban Poor***Stockwell, Clinton   
   1993 "The Church and the City: A Five Stage History". ***Urban Mission***, Vol. 11, No. 1, September 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Notes for this section modified from Mike Ridell's course notes 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. Lewis Mumford  
   1961 ***The City in History, Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects,*** New York Harcourt Brace & World. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)