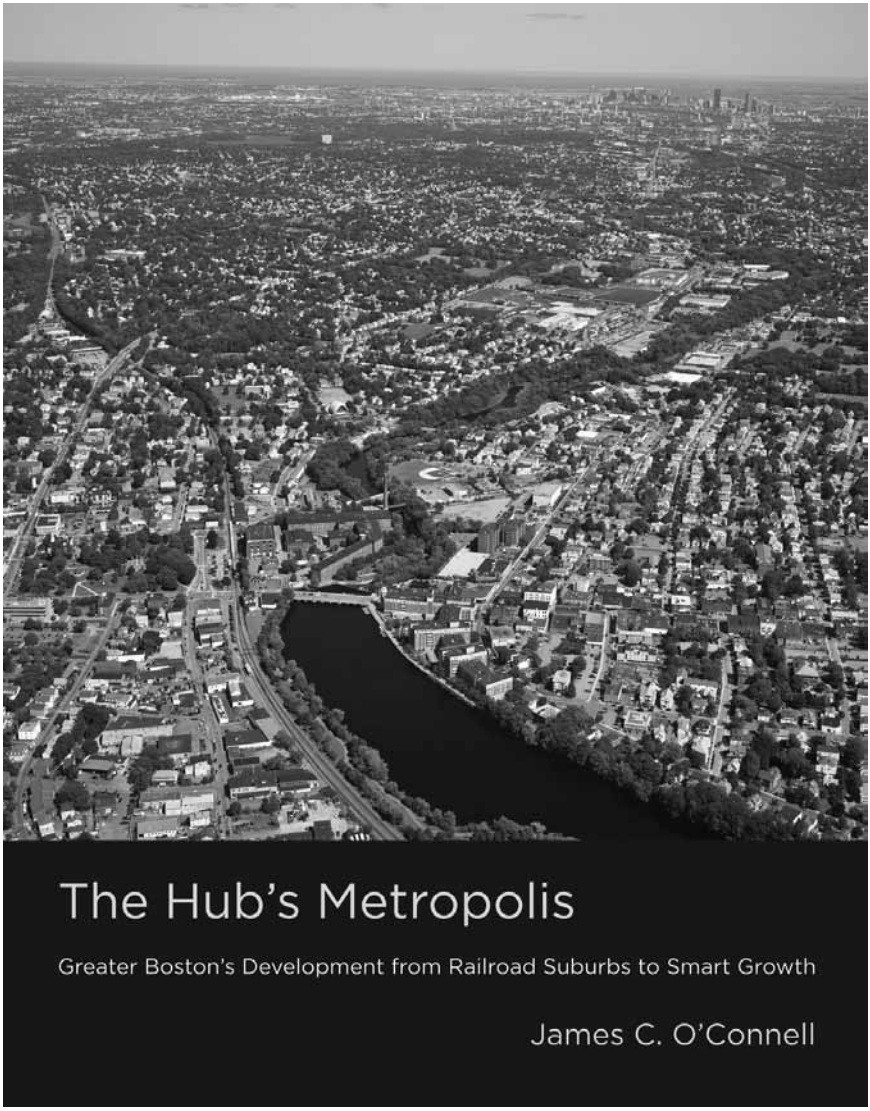

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EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Hub's Metropolis:
A Glimpse into Greater Boston's Development

James C. O'Connell

Editor's Introduction: *Our Editor's Choice selection for this issue is excerpted from the book,* The Hub's Metropolis: Greater Boston's Development from Railroad Suburbs to Smart Growth *(Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013). All who live in Massachusetts are familiar with the compact city of Boston, yet the history of the larger, sprawling metropolitan area has rarely been approached as a comprehensive whole. As one reviewer writes, "Comprehensive and readable, James O'Connell's account takes care to orient the reader in what is often a disorienting landscape." Another describes the book as a "riveting history of one of the nation's most livable places—and a roadmap for how to keep it that way." James O'Connell, the author, is intimately familiar with his topic through his work as a planner at the National Park Service, Northeast Region, in Boston. He is also the author of three other books on Cape Cod and the Pioneer Valley.*[1]

* * * * *

There are two Bostons. The most obvious is the historic hub city of forty-eight square miles. The second is the metropolitan area, which is more difficult to grasp. It varies in size and makeup depending on who is defining it. Some consider it to be the 101 cities and towns around Boston that are covered by

the Metropolitan Area Planning Council. The federal government identifies 234 communities in the Boston-Cambridge-Quincy, MA-NH Metropolitan Statistical Area and 385 communities in the Boston-Worcester-Manchester, MA-RI-NH Combined Statistical Area. Geographers, demographers, and marketers each define regional retail, labor, and media markets according to the conventions of their fields.

Because of its rich history, the city of Boston has been the subject of thousands of books and studies. Such iconic landmarks as Boston Common, Quincy Market, Beacon Hill, Back Bay, and Fenway Park define the urban core. Metropolitan Boston, on the other hand, has been studied in fragmentary ways, with few books providing a comprehensive overview.

Residents lack a clear perspective of the entire region and how it has developed. People know the communities they live and work in, but their concept of the rest of the region is often vague. Yet, the region provides the socioeconomic and environmental framework for contemporary life. It is essential to understand the regional context to address the challenges of global economic competition, rising energy prices, and climate change. Knowledge about regional development trends informs individual decisions about work, residence, education, and free time.

As an urban historian and planner, I have set out to explain metropolitan Boston's development in a way that helps people understand the landscape they live in and the decisions that are being made to change it. The book's format has been inspired by Yale professor Dolores Hayden's *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820–2000*. Hayden surveyed the history of American suburbs by creating typologies for seven eras of their development.[2]

I thought that I could provide a clear explanation of metropolitan Boston's layered history and geography by identifying nine distinct planning and development practices and arranging them into time sequences. Also included is a chapter on how Boston reversed its decline vis-à-vis the suburbs in the latter twentieth century and reinforced its role as the center of a multinucleated metropolis. Each layer of metropolitan development has distinctive characteristics in relation to transportation, real-estate development patterns, business location, housing styles, and the treatment of open and public space.

With the country's oldest large city and some of the earliest suburbs, Greater Boston has multiple layers of suburban infrastructure, architecture, and institutions, which only New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore can match. Boston has been a national pacesetter for many features of suburbanization: country estates, railroad suburbs, streetcar suburbs, zoning,

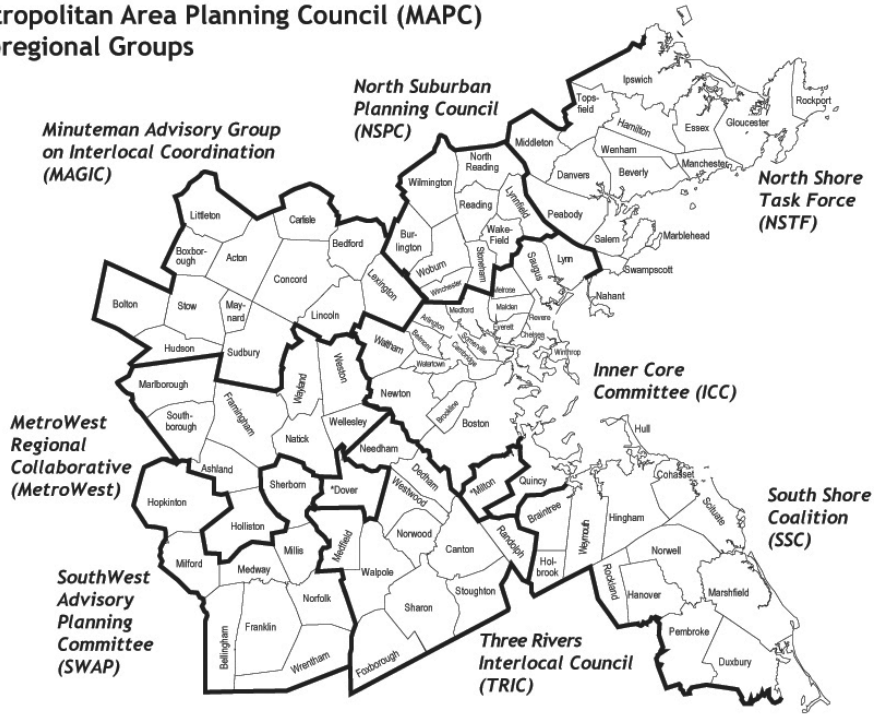
open-space conservation, highway beltways, shopping centers, office parks, edge cities, and transit-oriented development. Landscape architecture pioneer Frederick Law Olmsted settled in his ideal garden suburb of Brookline. The Metropolitan District Commission's park-and-parkway system, which was created during the 1890s, was the country's first example of regional planning. The city of Boston is noteworthy for its vibrant central city, which suffered a painful postwar decline, but, through luck and pluck, it crafted a revival that few American cities can match. Metropolitan Boston is currently pursuing a new development paradigm popularly referred to as *smart growth* as a dialectical response to the low-density, automobile-oriented development pattern that has dominated for decades. This growth promotes more compact development, public transit, and preservation of open spaces.

The Hub's Metropolis focuses on the territory covered by Boston's Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), which serves the region's core 101 cities and towns inside the Interstate-495 beltway. The suburban communities that have been trendsetters in various eras receive the most attention. For the latter twentieth century, the book expands its focus to include areas that traditionally were on Boston's periphery, such as Cape Cod, the Merrimack Valley, and Southern New Hampshire. Boston's relationship with its suburbs is a major theme. Whereas most suburbanites originally worked in Boston, today they may work anywhere in the region and visit Boston only infrequently. Yet, Boston remains the region's primary business center, a cultural and entertainment mecca, and the symbolic hub.

The idea for this book originated in 2000, when my family was scouting homes to buy in the Boston area. As we were driving along Blue Hill Parkway in Milton, I recognized that this parkway and the surrounding neighborhood were typical of Boston's inner core suburbs. I thought it would be interesting to learn more about how these early twentieth-century suburban communities developed, and this book project developed from there. My favorite avocation is investigating places and writing about where I have lived. I have written three books on Springfield and the Pioneer Valley and a history of Cape Cod tourism. Moving to metropolitan Boston (residence in Newton; workplace in downtown Boston), I set out to understand Boston's metropolitan development. . . .[3]

The Hub's Metropolis combines the perspectives of history and urban-regional planning for both a general audience and for those particularly interested in local history, planning, preservation, development, and environmental protection. This book elucidates the major trends that have affected the development of Boston from a small but vigorous city two centuries ago to a sprawling metropolitan area today.

Figure 1-2:
Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) Subregional Groups



*Communities represented by more than one subregional group: Dover is in TRIC and SWAP; Milton is in ICC and TRIC.

Boston Metro Towns

Source: Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization, *Be Informed, Be Involved: The Public Participation Program of the BRMPO*, (Updated May 2012), accessed at www.ctps.org.

Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC)

Source: Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), www.mapc.org/

CHAPTER 1: METROPOLITAN BOSTON'S LAYERS OF DEVELOPMENT

The scale of Greater Boston is enormous. According to one survey, Greater Boston ranks as the world's sixth largest metropolitan area, with 1,736 square miles.[4] According to the US Census Bureau, the Boston-Worcester-Manchester MA-RI-NH Combined Statistical Area (CSA) has a population of 7,427,336 living in 385 communities, which makes it the country's fifth largest CSA. The vast region can be difficult to comprehend.

Boston's metropolitan landscape has been two hundred years in the making. This book identifies nine layers of suburban development, each having a distinctive pattern of development:

- Traditional Village Centers and Proto-Suburbs (1800–1860)
- Country Retreats (1820–1920)
- Railroad Suburbs (1840–1920)
- Streetcar Suburbs (1870–1930)
- Metropolitan Parkway Suburbs (1895–1945)
- Suburban Mill Towns (1820–2012)
- Postwar Automobile Suburbs (1945–1970)
- Interstates, Exurbs, and Sprawl (1970–2012)
- Smart Growth Era (1990–2012).

Each layer of suburbanization has created a characteristic approach to real-estate patterns, transportation, housing styles, business location, and open space in shaping the built landscape. Government and private-sector investments in railroads, streetcar lines, and highways structured each phase of suburban development. Those planning transportation improvements had visions for changing life in the region, but the transformations always turned out to be farther reaching than anyone could have imagined. Cultural conceptions of appropriate modes of suburban and city living and the desire to create communities suitable for certain social classes also played paramount roles in shaping each phase of suburban development.

These factors combined to create a "vernacular" development pattern, which was carried out by thousands of actors over decades [In this context vernacular refers to the common building style and/or architecture concerned with domestic and functional rather than monumental buildings]. It was not dictated by a premeditated plan but rather evolved organically from adaptations to new transportation infrastructures and modes of living. In

reality, planners did not plan much actual development—they created the framework for individuals and businesses to undertake it.

Each model of suburban development has left its imprint on the landscape. In some places, a development template complemented an earlier model and in others replaced it. Because Boston is so old and its suburbs are some of the country's earliest, the metropolitan area incorporates overlays of country towns, railroad and streetcar suburbs, automobile-oriented suburbs and commercial sprawl, urban neighborhoods, and an increasing number of compact, transit-oriented projects. The span of each era does not have clear-cut temporal boundaries. There can be overlap between different suburban paradigms. For instance, country retreats for the wealthy, railroad suburbs, and streetcar suburbs were all developing at the same time.

Until about 1820, Boston had no suburbs. Surrounding towns were engaged in farming and used the port of Boston as their commercial center. After the War of 1812, Boston grew to such a point that the surrounding communities of Cambridge, Charlestown, Roxbury, and Somerville started to become extensions of the city. Development was ad hoc. Market gardens, stockyards, blacksmiths, and small factories opened there to serve Boston. As country roads were the only transportation infrastructure, travel was slow and settlement around Boston was scattered.

The first suburban residents were wealthy families who established country seats to escape from the city. Because horse-drawn travel was slow, country estates were initially located in a close ring around Boston. There was no overarching plan for creating a landscape of country estates, but a clear paradigm evolved for estates, where gentleman farmers created model farms and experimental gardens. By the 1840s, the design of the houses and grounds sought to achieve a pastoral Arcadia, a goal that continues to influence suburbanites of all social classes.

The first concerted plans for shaping a metropolitan region came from the investors who built the railroads radiating out from Boston in the mid-1830s. They originally expected trains to carry agricultural and industrial freight, but within a decade commuters discovered that the railroad allowed them to live in the country and work in Boston. Speculators spotted opportunities and bought tracts of land near railroad stations, which they divided into house lots. These subdivisions, in Brookline, Newton, and Belmont, were the first planned suburbs. The upper and middle classes developed a template for suburbia that cultivated a country atmosphere and a cocoon for family life, while still taking advantage of the nearby economic and cultural opportunities of one of America's foremost cities. The new suburbs attracted

Yankee businessmen and professionals seeking to escape the industry, immigrants, and infections of the teeming city.

Landscape architect and Brookline resident Frederick Law Olmsted helped translate the upper-class suburban development pattern for broader middle-class use. He designed leafy subdivisions in Brookline and beyond and proselytized for suburban communities that had ample tree belts and lawns. Olmsted claimed that the pastoral suburbs represented "the most attractive, the most refined, and the most soundly wholesome forms of domestic life, and the best application of the arts of civilization to which mankind has yet attained."[5]

The coming of the horse-drawn streetcar (1852) and, later, the electrically powered streetcar (1889) transformed how the region was settled. The streetcar companies laid out a web of transit lines with the intention of spurring commuting and the spread of affordable, lower-density housing, creating "streetcar suburbs." Horsedrawn streetcars pushed the city's effective radius out four miles, and the electric streetcar created a development zone that stretched nine miles from downtown. The leading streetcar developer was Henry Whitney, who built Boston's first electric streetcar line, on Beacon Street in Brookline, while buying up large tracts along the street to sell for housing lots. Frederick Law Olmsted was responsible for designing Whitney's streetcar boulevard, which eventually became lined by upscale apartment blocks. All over metropolitan Boston, small-scale land investors and home builders incrementally developed neighborhoods along streetcar lines. The houses, built on smaller lots than the railroad suburbs, ranged from single- to three-family homes, housing middle-class and lower-middle-class families.

As Greater Boston grew in the post–Civil War era, so did the burdens of planning. In order to obtain the urban infrastructure of roads, water supply, sewers, schools, street lighting, parks, and other services, the surrounding municipalities of Dorchester, Roxbury, West Roxbury, Charlestown, and Brighton voted to become part of Boston. In 1874, Brookline voted to reject annexation and provide its own municipal services. This provided a precedent for other suburban communities to maintain their autonomy.

Nevertheless, suburbs experienced difficulty providing public services and turned to metropolitan planning. In 1889, the state legislature established the Metropolitan Sewerage Commission to build sewerage collection facilities for Boston and surrounding suburbs. In 1895, the state created the Metropolitan Water Board to provide a regional water supply. The most influential regional entity was the Metropolitan Park Commission, which was established in 1893 to conserve natural beauty spots and provide recreational opportunities

in a Metropolitan District initially made up of Boston and thirty-five neighboring communities. Landscape architect Charles Eliot's metropolitan parks created a framework of green spaces for a suburban land pattern that featured single-family and some two-family houses built in relatively compact neighborhoods. The leafy parkways set the stage for automobiles to become the leading mode of commuting and the adjoining countryside to be suburbanized. The metropolitan park system, which was a signature Progressive Era initiative, prioritized the creation of public space as did no other era of development.

By 1910, Boston was the fourth largest metropolitan area in the country, trailing only New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. Metropolitan Boston had a population of 1,520,470 living across 414 square miles. *A Handbook of New England* (1917) observed: "This great concentrated population, equipped with the intensive transportation facilities of a huge metropolis, is what invariably astonishes the stranger who, with census figures in mind, expects to find Boston a city of the St. Louis, Cleveland, or Baltimore type, rather than one comparing with Chicago and Philadelphia."[6]

In the metropolitan landscape, there were also mill towns, which represented a different sort of development pattern. In Lowell, Lawrence, and many smaller manufacturing communities, the factory owners built massive factories as well as tenements and boardinghouses for workers. These paternalistic communities were relatively self-contained. With the demise of the textile and shoe industries and the increased accessibility provided by the highways after World War II, mill towns like Brockton and Haverhill began to blend into the rest of the metropolis, even taking on some of the physical and socioeconomic attributes of suburbia. During the 1970s and the rise of historic preservation, New Englanders discovered that aging factories could be recycled for housing, commercial uses, and museums, creating a new paradigm for urban redevelopment.

In the residential suburbs, the biggest challenge was protecting the verdant community character and commensurate real estate values. During the late nineteenth century, upscale subdivisions utilized property covenants to insure that houses maintained a certain size and design. In the 1920s, zoning emerged as a municipal tool to formalize land-use patterns. Twenty-eight communities in Greater Boston created zones that separated residential, commercial, and industrial uses. Zoning also restricted multi-family dwellings from being located in the same areas as single-family homes. After World War II, zoning became ubiquitous. The other major instrument for preserving the pastoral quality of suburbs was land conservation.

Boston Skyline View

Source: www.penceland.com/citylife.html.

By the 1930s, the leading catalyst to suburban growth was the state's highway system. The most prominent highway was Route 128 (the main stretch opened in 1951), the limited access, four-lane highway that encircled Boston's Metropolitan District suburbs a dozen miles from downtown. The postwar spurt of highway construction was the outcome of the 1948 *State Highway Master Plan*, which called for a statewide network of highways. They ultimately included Boston's Central Artery, Massachusetts Turnpike, Southeast Expressway, Route 3, and Interstate 93. The state's highway program was complemented by funding for the Federal Interstate Highway System, which completed an extensive highway network by 1970.

Route 128, the country's first outer beltway, was called America's Technology Highway because it attracted many of the first office and research parks. Though incubated at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), tech businesses migrated to the suburbs during the 1950s and 1960s. Some state highways, especially Route 1 and Route 9, evolved into commercial strips. On Route 9, Framingham's Shoppers' World (1951) was the first regional shopping center on the East Coast.

The highway system drew thousands of families out of the cities into emerging suburbs after World War II. In upscale country suburbs like Lincoln, Weston, Sudbury, Dover, and Sherborn, builders constructed single-family houses on large lots in wooded settings, creating a model for housing development that spread far and wide. Subdivisions of mass-produced ranch and split-level houses became middle-class havens, from Weymouth to Westwood to Wakefield.

Just as the federal government played a critical role in funding interstate highways, it also spurred suburban residential development through Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and Veterans Administration (VA) mortgages. The postwar era saw the most concerted efforts on the part of government—federal and state—to promote planning and suburban growth. Meanwhile, this was the period of the greatest divide between the city and the suburbs. Boston, Cambridge, and smaller industrial cities like Brockton and Lawrence declined, as white middle-class families left for the suburbs.

The completion of Greater Boston's highway system in the early 1970s accelerated the sprawl development patterns that emerged after World War II. As in other parts of New England, highways expanded potential commuting distances, encouraged low-density housing, and fostered strips of shopping malls, big box stores, and office buildings clustered near highway exits. The shopping strips, which originally were lined with local businesses, became dominated by Wall Street-capitalized corporate chains.

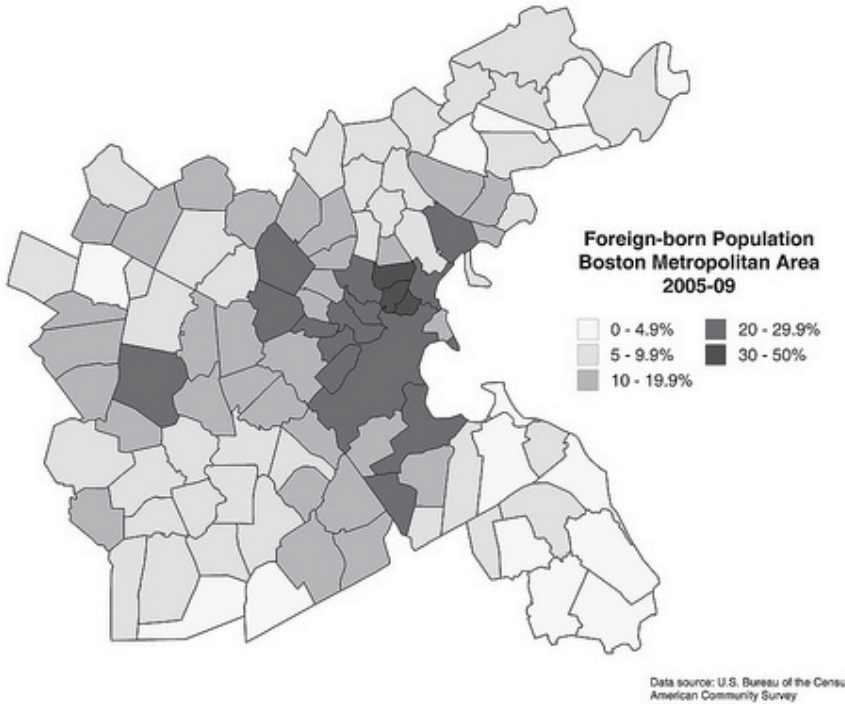
Like Route 128 before it, I-495 encircled the metropolitan area at a distance of almost thirty miles from downtown Boston. I-495 (which opened in the late 1960s) encouraged further spread-out business development, much of which accommodated the campuses of high-tech corporations like Digital Equipment, Wang Labs, EMC, and Bristol-Myers Squibb. With the ability to build far from the city, residential lots consumed increasingly more open space. Large developers played a key role in building subdivisions for both McMansions and less pretentious houses. Low-density land-use patterns reflected a desire to maintain the rural landscape and protect the social status quo.

The interstate highways spun off growth beyond conventional suburbs. In rural areas, second homes spurred low-scale suburbanization and commercial strips. Analysts refer to this automobile-oriented development pattern as "sprawl," "exurbia," or the "edgeless," "endless," or "limitless" city. Urban historian Robert Fishman observed that low-density suburbanization was a culturally embedded "deep structure" of development that could not be easily altered by planners, politicians, or developers.[7]

As Greater Boston spread into a vast hinterland, open developable land became scarce within the I-495 beltway. The region became "built out" under existing zoning. The spread of auto-oriented development degraded the natural environment and pastoral qualities of suburbs. Traffic congestion, concerns about greenhouse gas emissions, and a desire to maintain viable city and town centers have inspired a return to compact development patterns that are oriented to transit, biking, and walking. Personal-vehicle motor transportation is not about to lose its dominance any time soon, but the development patterns it has spawned are changing. The "smart growth" movement is reviving land-use patterns originally put in place by the railroad and streetcar suburbs of the nineteenth century.

The key to promoting compact development is the public transit system of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA). In recent decades, the MBTA has extended its services and ridership. With about 120 commuter rail stations and dozens of subway and bus lines in the suburbs, the region has a public transit infrastructure that, despite physical and fiscal deficiencies that need to be addressed, provides a true alternative to the automobile. The compact, mixed-use development pattern has been reasserted in town centers and near commuter rail stations in Abington, Canton, Medford, Newton, Norwood, Salem, Waltham, Westborough, and many other suburbs.

The vision statement for the new planning paradigm is Boston's Metropolitan Area Planning Council's (MAPC) *MetroFuture* plan (2008). MAPC prepared *MetroFuture* as an advisory plan for 101 Greater Boston



Boston Foreign-Born Population

Source: Metro Boston Data Common at www.metrobostondatacommon.org.

cities and towns to determine how best to accommodate 465,000 people who are estimated to be added to the region's population by 2030. The planning process determined that recent sprawl trends would be unsustainable. *MetroFuture* proposed a growth scenario that would intensify development in existing urban neighborhoods and town centers and consume significantly less open land. The template for compact, mixed-use developments tends to be located near railroad and transit stations. Its intent is to reduce carbon emissions and mitigate the effects of climate change. The *MetroFuture* plan also called for complementing compact development with the preservation of remaining open land and the creation of greenways to encourage biking and walking.

Like earlier regional and city plans, the *MetroFuture* plan offers a narrative that describes the predicaments and aspirations of Greater Boston communities and how they intend to address them. MAPC's plan reflects a

significant shift in urban-suburban development policies, which is referred to as "smart growth," "New Urbanism," "sustainable development," or "walkable urbanism." These movements are national trends, and *MetroFuture* is a strategy for their pursuit in Greater Boston.

The resuscitation of compact mixed-development has been led by the cities of Boston and Cambridge, which have undergone a remarkable renaissance. This planning template has spread to suburban centers that once clustered around town greens and railroad stations. As with many things related to suburban development, Greater Boston seems to be ahead of the curve. Although often derided for fusty traditionalism, Boston has been an innovator in metropolitan development.

HJM

Notes

1. Quotes by Ethan Carr and Anthony Flint, taken from the book jacket.
2. Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003). Dolores Hayden categorizes American suburbs into seven types: Borderlands (1820-); Picturesque Enclaves (1850-); Streetcar Buildouts (1870-); Mail-Order and Self-Made Suburbs (1900-); Sitcom Suburbs (1940-); Edge Nodes (1960-); and Rural Fringes (1980-). Each type of suburb is represented in metropolitan Boston, although their timing and prevalence may differ from other parts of the country. The National Park Service has published a useful report providing a somewhat different categorization of American suburbs: Railroad and Horsecar Suburbs (1830-1890); Streetcar Suburbs (1888-1928); Early Automobile Suburbs (1908-1945); and Post-World War II and early Freeway Suburbs (1945-1960). David L. Ames and Linda Flint McClelland, *National Register Bulletin:*

Historic Residential Suburbs: Guidelines for Evaluation (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 2002), http://www.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/suburbs/index.htm.

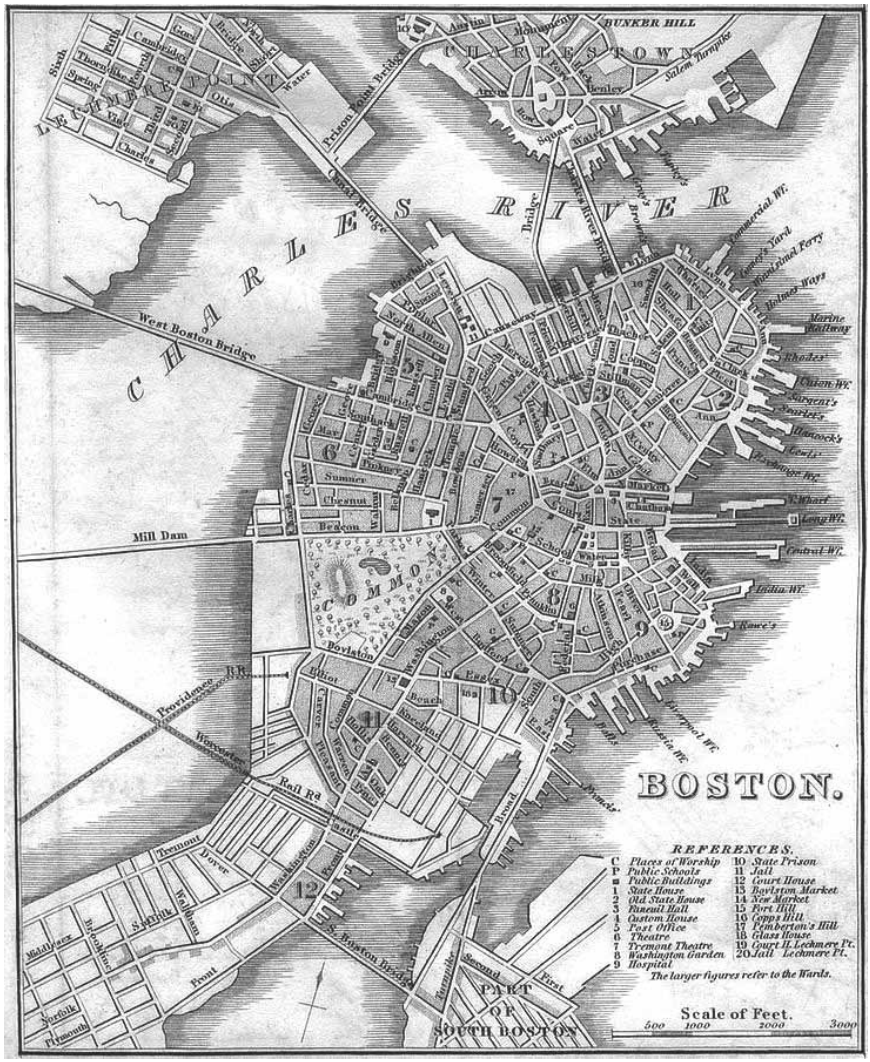
3. See also my other publications: James C. O'Connell, "The Evolution of Twentieth-Century Boston's Metropolitan Landscape," in *A Landscape History of New England*, ed. Blake Harrison and Richard W. Judd (MIT Press, 2011); "How Metropolitan Parks Shaped Greater Boston, 1893–1945," in *Remaking Boston: An Environmental History of the City and Its Surroundings*, ed. Anthony N. Penna and Conrad Edick Wright (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009); "Buildout: Why Boston and Hopkinton Need Each Other," *Architecture Boston*, March/April 2008; "Ahead or Behind the Curve?: Compact Mixed-Use Development in Suburban Boston" (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2003); "Connecting the Region and Its People: Civic Leadership in Greater Boston," in *Governing Greater Boston: The Politics and Policy of Place*, ed. Charles C. Euchner (Rappaport Institute of Greater Boston, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2003); "Thinking Like a Region: Greater Boston," in *Governing Greater Boston: Meeting the Needs of the Region's People,* ed. Charles C. Euchner (Rappaport Institute of Greater Boston, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2002).

4. "City Mayors Statistics," City Mayors website, http://www.citymayors.com/statistics/largest-cities-area-125.html. Of the world's twelve largest metropolitan cities by area, eleven are in the United States.

5. Olmsted, Vaux & Co., "Preliminary Report upon the Proposed Suburban Village at Riverside, Near Chicago," in *Civilizing American Cities: A Selection of Frederick Law Olmsted's Writings on Cityscapes,* ed. S.B. Sutton (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 295.

6. *A Handbook of New England* (Boston: Porter E. Sargeant, 1917), p. 404.

7. Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 189.



"Boston" from H.S. Tanner, *The American Traveller; or Guide Through the United States*, 8th Edition. (New York, 1842).