

# EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN CITIES: A COMPARISON

by Roy P. Drachman, C.R.E.

According to many of our country's planners, we must change the land use patterns of our metropolitan areas. They point to urban communities in Europe as models noting many features which, if they were available, would improve the quality of life in our own cities:

- Heavy concentration of families, including the more affluent, living in and around the central city
- Major community retail centers in downtown areas
- Mass transit systems which provide excellent transportation to and from central city areas and reduce the automobile population
- Shorter distances between homes, employment, medical facilities, churches, recreation places, etc.
- Lower energy consumption for transportation and residential building heating and cooling

In view of the environmental problems, the wasteful land use due to urban sprawl, and the pressing needs to conserve energy that the United States faces, it is especially important, say the planners, that we follow the European example. Yet these same planners often end up shaking their heads in frustration and disbelief.

## Tracing Our Urban Roots

Before we can decide what, if anything, American cities should import from their European counterparts and how, let's look at the origins and growth of both. What has caused them to develop as they have?

Most European cities began near a port on a sea, river

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or lake. For centuries, growth was kept as close to the dock area as possible so that people could walk to their jobs, to school and to recreational, religious and medical facilities. Only the very wealthy could afford country estates for weekends and vacations and they were usually within ten to fifteen miles away — only a few hours by horse-drawn vehicle. This resulted in high residential and commercial (fabricating, processing and manufacturing) densities near the harbor.

Designed and built by settlers with a European heritage and with recent recollections of their former homeland, many early American towns were duplicates of European cities. New York, Boston, Baltimore, Chicago, New Orleans, San Francisco, Philadelphia and Cleveland are examples. Evidence of their European influence remains today. Dozens of midrise and, in some instances, highrise apartment buildings surround the downtowns of these urban centers.

## The Automobile Arrives

With the advent of motorized transportation in the early 1900s, it was no longer necessary to live within walking distance of one's daily destinations. Still in their infancy, American cities were dramatically affected compared to the more mature European city centers. Rail service had provided some transportation in a few communities enabling their residents to commute quickly and economically. However the railroad's greatest growth period was in the early days of the automobile and it wasn't long before nearly every family owned a car.

One did not need to be wealthy anymore to enjoy country living, nor have to wait until a substantial "nest egg" was saved before realizing the fulfillment of the lifelong ambition to live in one's own home on one's own land. A family that could not afford an in-town residence or even a cooperative apartment, could now buy a small house on a low-priced suburban lot. All thanks to the automobile. However

it also was the automobile that caused major changes in older cities and would dominate the patterns for new metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles, Houston, Miami, Phoenix, San Diego, Salt Lake City, Dallas-Fort Worth and hundreds of smaller places.

### **Exodus to the Suburbs**

The flight which began to peripheral areas in all communities — old and new, large and small — quickly reached massive proportions. Although thwarted for a decade and a half by the depression of the thirties and the construction ban during World War II, the die had been cast. The clamor by millions of families for suburban housing began anew with the end of the war. Builders everywhere responded and constructed millions of homes. Almost ninety percent of them were on individual lots in new subdivisions on the peripheries of communities. The automobile had eliminated any physical restraints to the new suburban lifestyle and easy financing through the FHA and GI housing programs removed the monetary ones.

The families that remained in the inner city of America's growing communities were generally older families who either enjoyed a good lifestyle because they lived in luxurious residences or who felt a strong sentimental attachment to their long time homes and neighborhoods. But it was just a matter of time before many of them abandoned their old homes for a suburban residence. Only a very few moved into highrise apartments close to the downtown areas.

In almost every city in America, these large abandoned older apartment and single family buildings became the new homes for thousands of minority families leaving the rural areas. The exchange was disastrous for most communities. Loss of resident purchasing power and retail income, and increased demands on city services, occurred simultaneously. The residential flight to the suburbs was accompanied by a similar movement of most retail establishments and thousands of jobs. The resulting loss in property tax collections and revenue weighed heavy on the central city, which had not only inherited the poor minorities but hundreds of empty job centers.

To make matters worse, transportation from the inner city to jobs in suburban plants was either nonexistent or woefully inadequate. City schools suffered from both the loss of most of the better teachers and the new demands from suburban schools for huge funds to meet their growing needs. Accordingly, along with the quality of their education, the skills of inner city youths dropped which has caused them to have the highest unemployment rate in the United States year after year. Lack of training and jobs led to increases in crime, making the city centers dangerous, especially after dark. Who would want to live in such a place? The answer is obviously

no one, including those who live there now and have no way to escape.

### **The Model of Today's European Cities**

The features of European cities are very appealing. Many cities are attractive places to live and appear to function efficiently. But what can we learn from them?

Europeans have witnessed very little change in their central cities during the last 50 years. It is true that thousands of automobiles are now found on the streets and that many parking garages have been added to the scene; but their cities have not suffered the large sections of rot that have occurred in American cities and which are caused mainly by the influx of the poor minority families. Slum areas exist, but are generally located in neighborhoods which have always been home for the underprivileged. The slums are not found in the heart of European downtowns nor have they eroded the better residential areas in the inner cities.

Historically, small and midrise apartment buildings have ringed the downtown areas of such cities as London, Paris, Rome, Brussels, Madrid and many smaller ones. Many downtown buildings provide business locations on the first floor or two and have apartments above, although the better residential units are in buildings without commercial facilities. In Paris, there are hundreds of blocks of four- to six-story apartment buildings that are eighty, ninety and sometimes over one hundred years old. They have been modernized on the interior, elevators have been added, and most have been continuously occupied for generations and by many of the city's wealthiest families.

No mass exodus of families to the suburban areas has taken place and there are no large numbers of apartments for minorities to occupy in central city areas. In Paris, as in many European cities, in-town apartments have provided the community's best lifestyle for years. Contrary to the custom in most American metropolitan areas, families in Europe which can afford the very best almost invariably have chosen inner city apartments over suburban houses.

Neither have retail firms abandoned their traditional downtown locations for suburban shopping centers (although many have branch stores in outlying areas), nor have commercial firms left their offices in downtown districts to the degree they have in America. Simply stated, people in European downtowns have employment opportunities as well as goods and services available near their homes.

Many of these cities have fixed rail transportation systems which enable people to travel into and out of the downtown areas quickly and economically without cluttering the streets with automobiles. The better restaurants and hotels are located in the

downtown areas in nearly all European cities. This is the case only in older cities in the United States, such as New York, New Orleans, San Francisco and one or two others. Unfortunately, it is not safe on most streets in these cities and the hotels and restaurants rely on the heavy concentration of business offices and daytime employment and nighttime entertainment activity for their success.

Fear of violence is not a factor in most European cities. The downtown areas after dark generally are not deserted and the streets are safe places in contrast to American cities. As a result, great numbers of pedestrians can be seen out strolling for an evening walk and going to and coming from theatres, stores, libraries and educational institutions.

It should be recognized that many European countries have laws that give power to public officials and their planners enabling them to control the volume of growth of housing units and, in some cases, commercial development. They can control the location of new residences and through this control can dictate the destiny of their cities.

- In France, regional shopping center sites are chosen by the national government and are leased or sold to a developer selected from a list prepared by government agencies. Competition with the downtown retail district remains restricted.
- In Denmark and Sweden, the locations and numbers of new residential districts are completely controlled by the “state” which also has control over installation of utilities, roads and fixed-rail mass transit lines running into Copenhagen and Stockholm.
- Great Britain controls the land area occupied by its larger cities. For example, the government has established a “ring” of open space around London and has acquired all rights of development within it without compensation to the owners — an open space easement over farmland, in reality. To accommodate its growth rate, the national government has a long-term program for the development of “new towns.” Well over a million Englishmen and Scotsmen now live in these government sponsored and financed new towns. This has relieved the pressure for growth in the inner areas of their larger communities. An important feature of the new town is a program to encourage large companies to locate plants and employment centers there. These incentives include money for new machinery, factory buildings, employee training and even bonuses to both the companies and employees.
- Belgium and Holland also have tight land use controls that would not be possible under our Constitution. Their cities and suburbs expand only as much as the “state” determines.

The regulations and controls existing in most European nations have had a lot to do with what has happened to both the cities and the suburbs. Most Americans would not accept such controls in any form — that’s why their ancestors left the “old country” in the first place. However, no matter how they are measured, healthy downtowns are found in nearly all urban areas in Europe.

### **The American Cityscape and Its Stumbling Blocks**

American cities are decidedly different than their European counterparts and all efforts to import old country features that would unquestionably improve our inner city areas have largely failed.

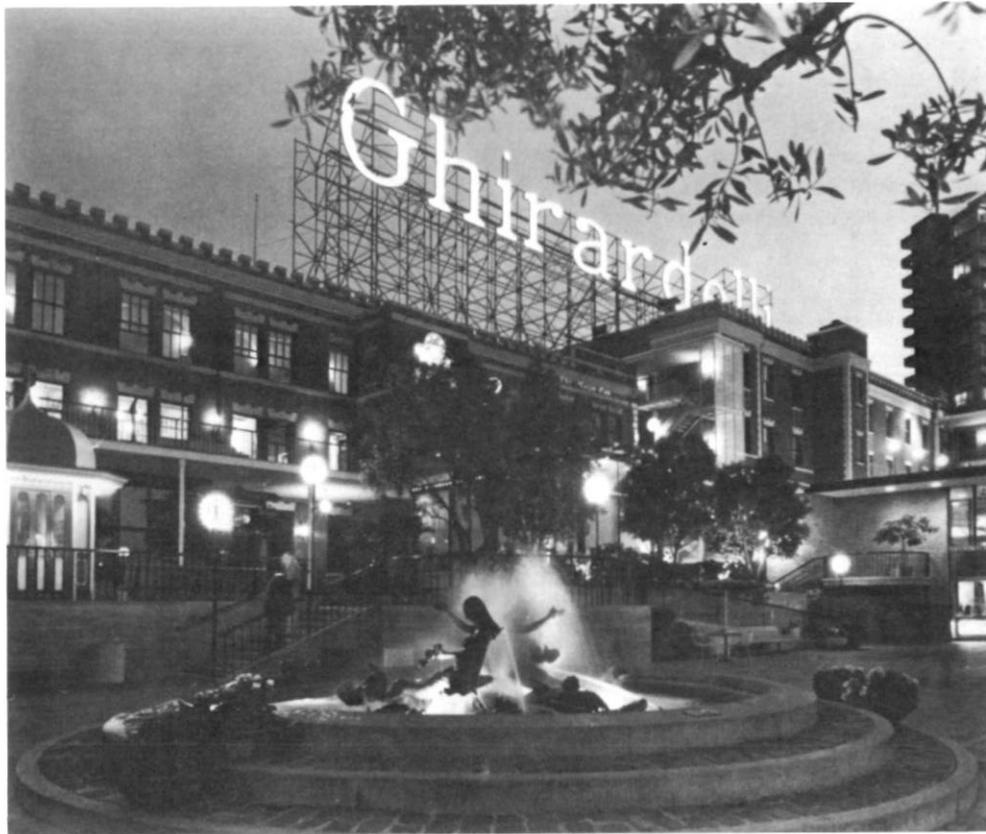
Any student of America’s cities must note the recent and continuing burst of development of office space in the inner city areas. Millions of square feet of new office buildings are being constructed in almost every community in the central city areas. (This has happened to a lesser degree in European cities, some of which through architectural controls have discouraged new highrise structures and forced most new office development into peripheral areas such as La Defense outside Paris’ central district.) The vitality of American cities is enabling them to absorb a new wave of highrise office space that is costing \$100 or more per square foot to build and which is readily renting at \$18 or more per square foot annually.

Hotels are likewise being built in the central city areas of some communities and others are planned, but these are generally part of a convention complex provided at public expense in an effort to revive a fading part of the community. And again, these hotels have not had a major impact on retail patterns. Witness the Omni Centers in Atlanta and Miami, although the latter is steadily improving. Dallas, New Orleans, Phoenix (which has been a disaster to date), Tucson, San Francisco and a few others are also examples.

So while we are seeing a revival of the central city as a place where some companies want to operate their business, it is also evident that they are strictly “nine-to-five” activity centers with practically little or no spillover benefits to retail, recreation or restaurant operations.

Retail establishments have long had problems with extremely high rates of “shrinkage” in their inventories in central city stores from shoplifting and from inside theft because of the type of person employed. It is not uncommon for shrinkage to exceed the profits of a store, making costs of security much higher in nearly all downtown department stores than in the branch stores. As a result of these problems, retail concerns are focusing all or most of their expansion plans on outlying areas.

Violence has been another factor in the loss of retail establishments in our cities’ downtowns. Violence and fear of violence are an accepted way of life for



Ghirardelli Square  
San Francisco, California

dwellers in the central cities or “war zones.” They either have elaborate security systems in their luxury residences or, if their homes are in the areas long since abandoned by the affluent, they live in constant fear. In many cities, shoppers don’t feel safe on the streets or in the parking garages in the daylight much less in the evening (which has become an increasingly important shopping period now that fifty percent of the country’s women are employed). Those who don’t have to be downtown after dark, and even during the daytime, stay away.

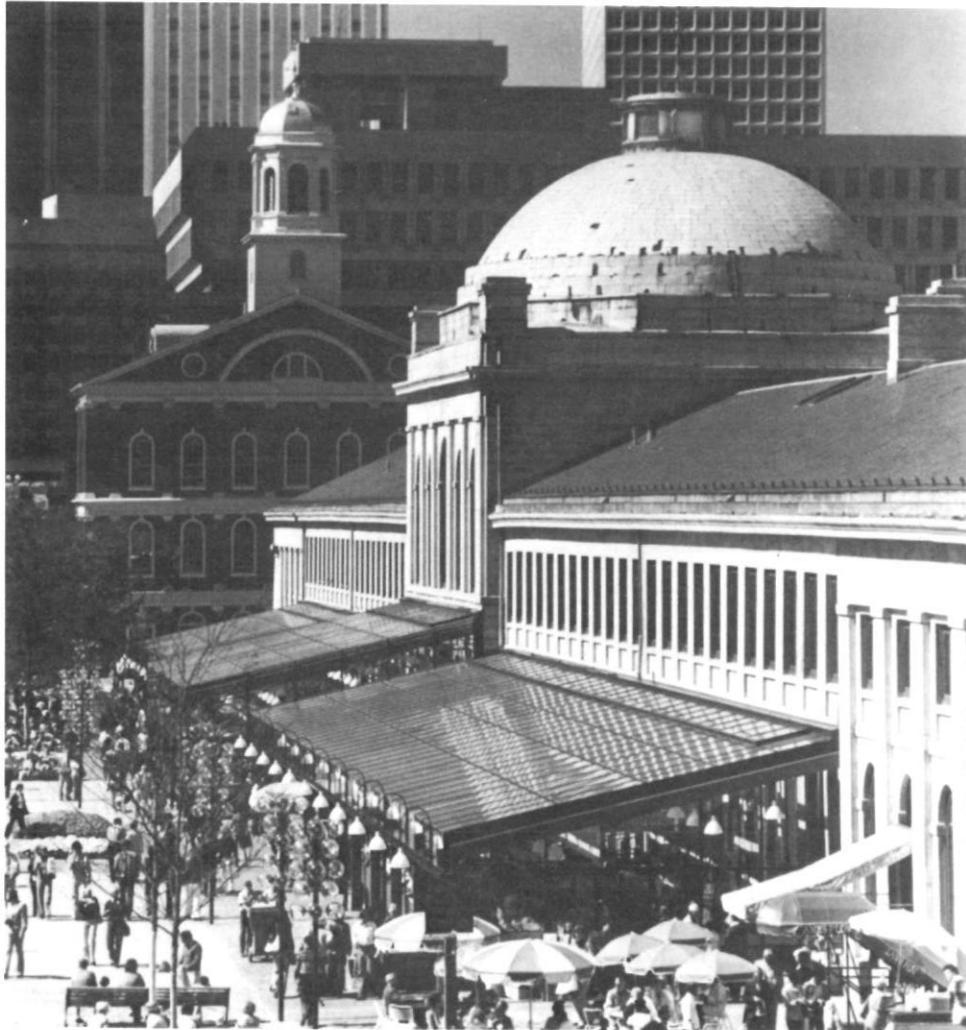
We hear much about the “movement back to the city,” but so far moving large numbers of families back into the inner city has been a fruitless endeavor. Looking at statistics for several cities, it is apparent that the movement is a trickle at best. The figures for Chicago over the last few years show that the number of minority families that have moved into the city only slightly exceeds the number of affluent families who deserted to the suburbs. Is Chicago any better off with such a slight population increase considering the type of change that has occurred? The answer is obvious.

A recent study by the Rice Center on growth patterns in the Houston area and the effects on future growth of attempts by various government agencies to direct

new residential development into the inner city, forcefully states that not more than ten percent of the residential units to be created in greater Houston during the next ten years will be located in the central city. The growth patterns established during the last two decades will prevail, which means that ninety percent of Houston’s growth will be located in peripheral areas of the community.

Many American communities have been attempting to encourage and/or force homebuilders to construct new housing in the inner city with little or no success. In Tucson, such an effort, with full support and cooperation of the local association of home builders and all agencies involved, required over two years and a sizeable “money and services” contribution by the city to provide less than forty units. Unfortunately this project did not trigger other homes to be built in the inner city and is considered a failure in achieving the desired goals.

Principal problems in moving people into the inner city revolve around the availability of land in neighborhoods that are acceptable to families and at prices that will not force the cost of such housing to rise beyond the price home buyers can afford. Without exception, land for housing in the suburbs can be purchased at a fraction of the costs for land in the



Faneuil Hall  
Boston, Massachusetts

central cities. The price differential for inner city land runs from two to five times the cost for land in the suburbs.

This differential could be offset to a considerable degree by increased densities in the inner city. Townhouses and condominiums with densities of up to ten units per acre would reduce the impact of higher land costs. But there is a hindrance. Residents in city after city have told their elected officials at public hearings that they are strongly opposed to increasing densities in their neighborhoods. This applies to many run-down older areas where near slum conditions exist as well as to better residential sections. The result is that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to get elected officials to bite the bullet and make the unpopular political decisions needed to move a large number of families back into the inner city.

The United States federal government, in coopera-

tion with local public agencies, has spent billions of dollars in efforts to create suitable housing and revive the inner city areas through its urban renewal and public housing programs only to see disastrous results. Both programs have been abandoned. To make matters worse, in many cities where government sponsored rehabilitation programs were responsible for a considerable number of very old houses being remodeled for occupancy by more affluent people, those being forced out had no place to move. Furthermore, dilapidated residential units occupied by the poor are being assessed by taxing authorities in accordance with the values of nearly rehabilitated dwellings. The resulting increase in taxes causes minority residents to be priced out of the market and again with no place to go.

Moving families back to the inner city is fraught with a chain of events that only creates new problems. The lure of "a home on a piece of land of my own" has

been too strong for the majority of American families to resist, especially in view of the higher cost of land in town and the problems relating to violence, smaller-sized dwelling space, poor schools, lack of open space and, in many cases, higher taxes. Reduced driving time, reduced heating and cooling bills and better cultural facilities have not been enough to offset the negatives.

It appears that the biggest stumbling blocks to changes in our cities are, first, an inherent desire by Americans for their own home on their own property, and second, fear of violence. A psychologist might say that these are emotional issues, and to a large degree they are just that, but emotions are very powerful in causing one to do or not do a lot of things.

### **Looking Into the Future**

It is important to acknowledge that our cities are the way they are because of the automobile. To change them materially would take decades. Americans might well opt for a war before they'll give up their automobiles, although there are compromises that no doubt will be considered before such drastic steps are taken.

Perhaps in the future some methods or programs will be developed to bring large numbers of families back to live in the inner city of American metropolitan areas, but as of now the idea is nothing more than wishful thinking by public officials and planners.

Some believe that expansion of mass transit would turn the tide, but it should be remembered that buses and trains run both ways — into and out of the city — making it easy to live in the suburbs where all of one's activity takes place except for the forty hours spent working downtown and the time to get there.

Unless a very large purchasing power can be created for or moved back to the inner city, there will be no major revival of retail activity. It is true that in some cities, such as New York, Chicago, Cincinnati, Seattle and Minneapolis, old line department stores enjoy substantial sales volume, but nevertheless the downtown stores' share of total retail sales in the community is much smaller than it once was and is declining annually. It is also true that in a few cities new department stores (they can be counted on one hand!) have been built in downtown areas and others are planned in inner city shopping centers. However, generally these are part of a large program for housing and recreational facilities in efforts to revive the inner city. Their success is yet to be proven.

In downtown Boston, Faneuil Hall has achieved success as a place to shop, browse and eat and Philadelphia's Galleria is proving to be a popular place with shoppers. However, it must be recognized that these are very unusual situations and have little or no impact in reviving the old retail areas of the community. Their success and that of Ghirardelli Square in the inner city of San Francisco will doubtlessly cause others to attempt to copy the idea, but it should be noted that these three cities are among the oldest communities in America and few if any newer cities present similar opportunities. It is a shame that every city cannot have a Faneuil Hall to bring life, activity and people back into the inner city. However never in the foreseeable future will our downtowns recapture the position of being the dominant shopping area in our communities.

Abandoning the central city for a home of one's own where it feels safer may be the result of emotional thinking, but without a dramatic change American cities will continue their current growth pattern and remain permanently different from European communities with few, if any, of their interesting and attractive features.