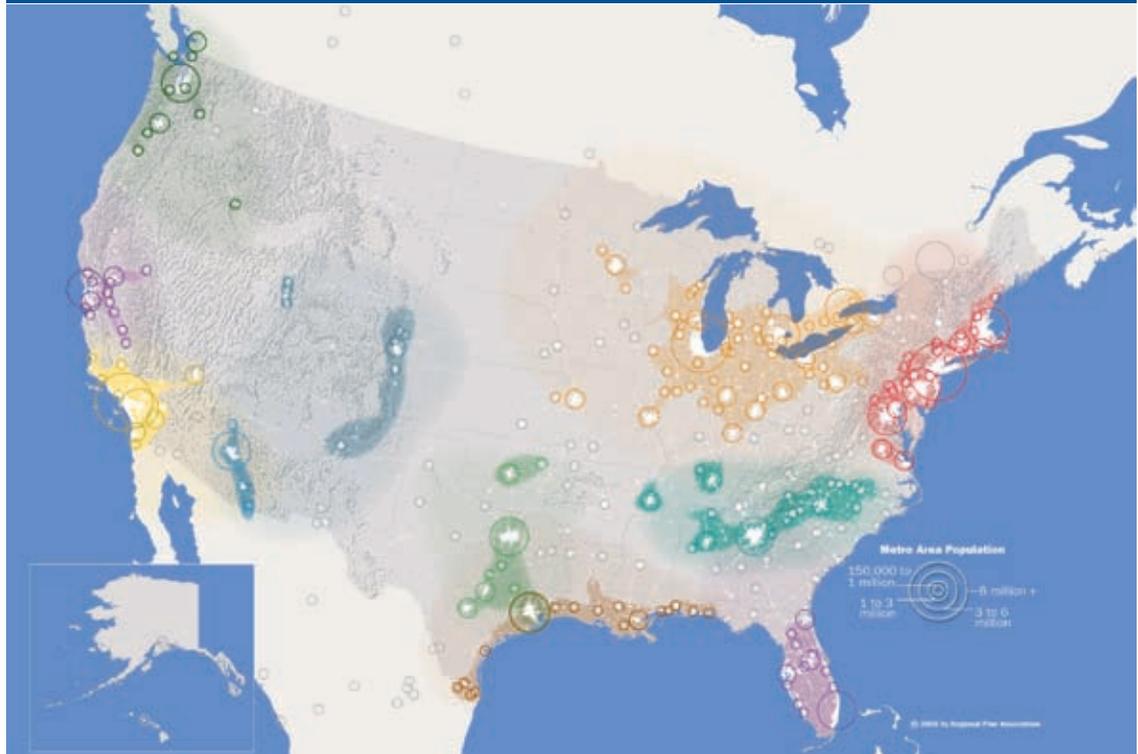


# After Sprawl: THE

FIGURE 1  
Megaregions Are Growing Across the United States



Source: America 2050 Program, Regional Plan Association, New York

Rutherford H. Platt

Fifty years ago, a heretical little book turned the smug assumptions of city planning of the 1950s upside down. Aggressively titled *The Exploding Metropolis: A Study of the Assault on Urbanism and How Our Cities Can Resist It* (Editors of *Fortune* 1958), the book comprises essays by five journalists self-described as “people who like cities.” Two of the writers, William H. Whyte, Jr. and Jane Jacobs, would become renowned for their perspectives, first expressed in this book, that challenged post-war urban policies on two fronts—at the fringe (“Urban Sprawl” by Whyte) and at the core (“Downtown is for People” by Jacobs and “Are Cities Un-American?” by Whyte).

Witnessing the loss of treasured rural landscapes to bulldozers in his home region of Chester

County, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere, Whyte may have been the first writer to name the process of “urban sprawl” and deplore its consequences in practical terms:

Sprawl is bad aesthetics; it is bad economics. Five acres are being made to do the work of one, and do it very poorly. . . . And it is unnecessary. . . . it is not too late to lay down sensible guidelines for the communities of the future. . . . It is not too late to reserve open space while there is still some left—land for parks, for landscaped industrial districts, and for just plain scenery and breathing space. (Whyte 1958, 117)

*The Exploding Metropolis* helped to trigger a reaction against the prevailing view that sprawl was inevitable and desirable, as in Jean Gottmann’s *Megalopolis*, in which he described the chain of

# HUMANE METROPOLIS

cities along the U.S. northeastern seaboard as “a stupendous monument erected by titanic efforts” (1961, 23). But in the same year, the prescient Lewis Mumford demurred: “The ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible” (1961, 465).

Landscape architects gradually joined the fray—Kevin Lynch (1960) in *The Image of the City* deplored the depressing spread of highway and suburban landscapes. Ian McHarg (1968) urged urban professionals to “design with nature” and Anne Whiston Spirn (1985, 5) famously added: “The city, suburbs, and the countryside must be viewed as a single, evolving system. . . . Nature in the city must be cultivated, like a garden, rather than ignored or subdued.”

Harmful impacts of sprawl in terms of air and water pollution, waste of energy and time, traffic congestion and highway accidents, lack of affordable housing, increased flooding, and loss of biodiversity have been widely documented (Platt 2004, ch. 6). Also, the fiscal impacts of sprawl on local communities have been evaluated by researchers at the Brookings Institution, the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, and elsewhere.

Slaying the “beast of sprawl” has been the Holy Grail of planners and land use lawyers for decades, stimulating the development of new tools like planned unit development (PUD), cluster zoning, subdivision exactions, preferential taxation of farm and forest land, transfer of development rights (TDR), state land use planning, and growth management. Reflecting the antisprawl fervor of the 1970s, a prominent policy report titled *The Use of Land* euphorically declared:

There is a new mood in America. Increasingly, citizens are asking what urban growth will add to the quality of their lives. They are questioning the way relatively unconstrained, piecemeal urbanization is changing their communities and are rebelling against the traditional processes of government and the marketplace. (Rockefeller Brothers Fund 1973, 33)

A “new mood” notwithstanding, sprawl has continued relentlessly with the encouragement of government policies and programs, including home loan subsidies, federal tax deductions for mortgage interest and property taxes, interstate highways, sewer and water grants, and low-density zoning laws. In 2008, 50 years since *The Exploding Metropolis* and 35 years since *The Use of Land*, it is difficult to claim victory in the war on sprawl. Certainly there have been regional and local successes in land conservation, such as the Cape Cod National Seashore, the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, the protection of Sterling Forest as a water source for northern New Jersey, and the hundreds of patches of woods, farmland, wetland, prairie, desert, alpine meadow, or rainforest which have been protected by government, land trusts, and grassroots advocacy.

The overall picture, however, is one of unremitting sprawl beyond the wildest imaginings of *The Exploding Metropolis* authors. Gottmann’s *Megalopolis* of 1961 has since expanded into New Hampshire and southern Maine, west to the Berkshires in Massachusetts, to the Poconos in eastern Pennsylvania, and south at least to Richmond, Virginia—embracing parts of 13 states and containing nearly 50 million people (Platt 2006, 314). Figure 1 shows nine other “megaregions” that have similarly “exploded” (Carbonell and Yaro 2005; Lang and Dhavale 2005).

## Defining the Humane Metropolis

The failure to control sprawl is widely blamed on the usual suspects—the private market, the property rights movement, conservative politicians and courts, zoning, and tax laws—but a more constructive response is to take a deep breath and ask “What next?” The vast regions already covered by sprawl comprise our present and future homes, for better or worse. An appropriate answer to “What next?” is to evaluate what needs to be done to make our metropolitan areas more habitable and sustainable, and how to meet those needs from here on.

This line of thinking led to the concept of “The Humane Metropolis,” which is more than a semantic

**Community activist Will Allen, a former professional basketball player, established and now directs Growing Power, Inc., which operates a network of urban gardening and youth training programs in Milwaukee and Chicago.**



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counterpoint to *The Exploding Metropolis* (Platt 2003; 2006). It represents a paradigm shift in thinking about urbanism and its possible outcomes. Bemoaning the state of our cities and suburbs, as many popular writers have done, is not constructive in itself. More useful, to paraphrase the optimistic Whyte, is to recognize that it is “not too late” to make incremental repairs and improvements in the urban fabric we have collectively woven.

The Humane Metropolis perspective embraces various strategies and initiatives now in progress that seek to make urban communities from neighborhoods to regions more:

- *green*—to protect and restore urban biodiversity and ecological services;
- *healthy and safe*—to encourage outdoor exercise and fitness, find relief from noise and stress; reduce risk of floods, fire, and crime.
- *efficient*—to promote better use of water, energy, materials, time, funding, and other resources;
- *equitable*—to improve environmental and social justice and provide both affordable housing and access to jobs; and
- *neighborly*—to enjoy encountering each other in shared urban spaces and activities (e.g., tree planting) that reflect pride of place and a sense of belonging to a larger community.

The Humane Metropolis was launched as the focus of a 2002 symposium in New York City supported by the Lincoln Institute, Laurance S. Rockefeller, and others (Platt 2003) and documented in the book *The Humane Metropolis: People and Nature in*

*the 21st Century City* (Platt 2006). The volume’s 27 contributors began to map the terrain of more humane cities and suburbs in terms of the following widely used initiatives.

- Rehabilitation and adaptation of older city parks and green spaces
- Protection and restoration of urban wetlands and other sensitive habitat
- Preservation of old growth trees and forest tracts
- Development of greenways and rail trails
- Urban gardening and markets
- Green buildings
- Brownfield remediation and reuse
- Urban watershed management
- Urban environmental education
- Environmental justice

### Spreading the Word

The Humane Metropolis perspective is gaining wider attention through its Web site and writings by the author and other observers (see Peirce 2007), and through a series of regional public workshops sponsored by the Lincoln Institute in collaboration with the Ecological Cities Project.

Pittsburgh was selected for the first workshop site in March 2007 as a Rustbelt city and region facing many economic, social, and environmental challenges, but with a remarkable array of community and watershed initiatives in progress. Located where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers meet to form the Ohio River, Pittsburgh’s twentieth-century history was a chronicle of the rise and

fall of the steel industry, coal mining, and railroads.

Between 1970 and 2000, Pittsburgh's population declined by 35.7 percent, from 520,000 to about 334,000. Its metropolitan area population also declined during the 1970s, but has since increased and stabilized at more than 2.3 million. Reflecting its changing economic functions in the national and global context, Pittsburgh's residents are like a diminished "family" inhabiting an aging but still elegant "mansion" constructed for a larger household in more prosperous times.

But the city is energetic! The Allegheny Conference on Community Development, a coalition of major corporations, universities, foundations, and NGOs has attacked the economic malaise of the region, building on its strengths in medical research, education, high technology, and tourism. Concurrently, an array of environmental and community improvements are being pursued by regional organizations including Sustainable Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy, Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, Pennsylvania Environmental Council, and the Riverlife Task Force, which is creating a ten-mile system of waterfront parks along Pittsburgh's three rivers.

In many respects, Pittsburgh is reinventing itself as a post-industrial metropolis based on new appreciation of its history, architecture, social diversity, cultural vitality, and environmental amenities. New energy is reflected in innovative partnerships involving government at all levels, private compa-

nies, nongovernmental organizations, foundations, and citizen groups of all kinds.

The workshop explored some of the pathways by which Pittsburgh and other cities are becoming more humane. Speakers and panelists from the city and region addressed urban stream and wetland restoration, urban gardens on vacant lots and school sites, healthful outdoor activities (e.g., rail trails), brownfield reuse, environmental education, and people-friendly parks and public spaces.

The second regional workshop was held in January 2008 in Riverside, California, the demographic antithesis of Pittsburgh. With more than 4 million residents in Riverside and San Bernardino counties, this area, known locally as the Inland Empire, ranks fourteenth in population among U.S. metropolitan areas and is one of the five fastest growing regions in the nation. In 2005 alone, Riverside County experienced the second highest county growth rate in California. Much of the Inland Empire's extraordinary population growth is due to households moving from coastal counties in search of more affordable housing, but often with the tradeoff of lengthy commutes to jobs elsewhere. This migration has caused worsening traffic congestion, degradation of air quality, and reduced time for personal and family life. And currently, the Inland Empire housing market is experiencing a high rate of adjustable mortgage foreclosures.

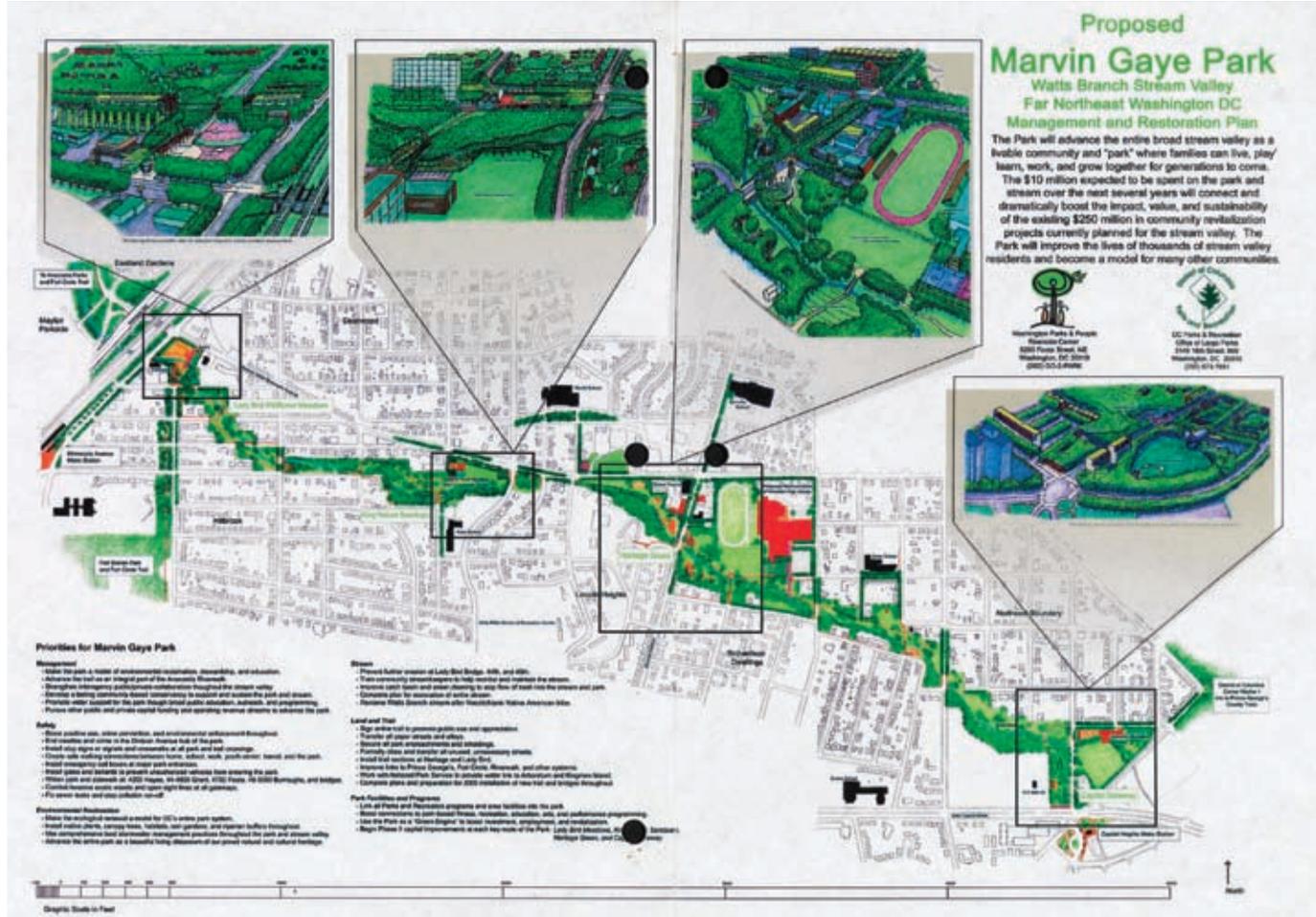
Known for its spectacular scenery, outdoor recreation opportunities, and diverse natural habitats



**Enhancing the lower West Side of Manhattan, the Highline Greenway Park is being constructed on an abandoned elevated rail viaduct. This community project is managed by Friends of the Highline with many public and private partners.**

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**FIGURE 2**  
**The Proposed Marvin Gaye Park in Washington, DC, Is a Community-based Project**



Created by Mary Belcher for Washington Parks & People. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

**Watts Branch, a tributary to the Anacostia River in Washington, DC, is the focus of neighborhood clean-up and revitalization efforts. It has been designated the Marvin Gaye Park after the musician whose career began in the neighborhood.**

and wildlife, the Inland Empire is also vulnerable to various natural hazards and environmental constraints. Development on forested mountain slopes has heightened the risk of wildfires during dry periods. The region experiences alternating cycles of drought and flash floods, and is at risk from earthquakes and landslides due to widespread seismic faults. In the face of population growth and climate change, water supply is a growing concern. And the extraordinary biological diversity and sensitive habitats of the region are threatened by expanding development.

This Lincoln Institute workshop was planned in collaboration with the Riverside Land Conservancy, the Blakely Center on Sustainable Suburban Development at the University of California at Riverside, and the Green Valley Initiative. Session topics focused on such topics as environmental and social challenges to the Inland Empire, greening the urban infrastructure, environmental justice, and urban watershed management.

**Taking an Ecological Approach**

Clearly we have come a long way from the top-down, macro plans that prevailed from the City Beautiful Movement in the early 1900s through the urban renewal era of the 1960s. Unlike architect- and developer-driven concepts of urban design, the Humane Metropolis has few aesthetic preconceptions, and it eschews grand plans, textbook designs, and megadevelopment that breeds gentrification.

Instead, efforts to make existing urban places more humane are typically home-grown and bottom-up. They are often scattered, uneven, and underfunded. But like ecological organisms they thrive on diversity—of goals, means, participants, disciplines, and (one hopes) viewpoints. They are opportunistic, as with Manhattan’s High Line Greenway Park, and they depend upon community catalysts like Will Allen, the founder of Milwaukee’s Growing Power urban farming program, Majora Carter of Sustainable South Bronx, Jane Block of the Riverside (California) Land Conser-

vancy, and Mike Houck, an urban eco-activist in Portland, Oregon.

Some initiatives are related to larger national movements focused on social and environmental justice, affordable housing, physical fitness, public health, natural disaster mitigation, reduction of global and local climate change. Most involve public-private partnerships, which sometimes evolve into regional alliances like Chicago Wilderness. Many foster social interaction among diverse populations sharing a common resource like a watershed, thus promoting what ethicist Andrew Light (2006) terms “ecological citizenship.”

Concerning urban water resources, for instance, many local streams are today being rehabilitated through coordinated efforts to improve water quality, restore habitat and fisheries, alleviate flooding, and promote recreation under the guidance of progressive groups like the Charles River Watershed Association in the Boston area or the Nine Mile Run Watershed Association in Pittsburgh. Stream-based initiatives in turn must be coordinated with, and contribute to, parallel efforts to promote sustainable economic development, affordable housing, environmental education, public health, and environmental justice.

Above all, the Humane Metropolis perspective is synergistic. Society tends to divide its attention and resources among competing needs, e.g. jobs, housing, education, health, and environment, and then address each one separately, if at all. But at the scale of urban communities (however defined), all immediate needs must be confronted simultaneously or progress in one area will be undermined by failure in others.

Ecology is “messy,” however, and so are older communities like Brooklyn’s Red Hook and Williamsburg, Boston’s Dudley Street, Pittsburgh’s Hill District, the vicinity of Cleveland Ecovillage, and Watts Branch in Washington, DC. But these and many other distressed neighborhoods are struggling to reinvent themselves—to plant vacant lots, clean up stream corridors, create new recreation spaces, and improve affordable housing and access to jobs.

Since 1985 in Boston, for example, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, which serves a mixed population of white, black, Latino, and Cape Verdean residents, has converted hundreds of vacant lots from illegal dumps to building sites for more than 600 units of affordable housing. Associated projects have improved local parks and schools, created urban gardens, and enhanced so-

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cial services. Watts Branch, a small tributary to the Anacostia River in Northeast Washington, DC, is the focus of community-based efforts to remove trash, plant trees and restore native vegetation, and promote outdoor exercise (see figure 2).

The Humane Metropolis ultimately evolves from informal communication, prompted by local leadership, leading to alliances that help to bridge the divides among efforts to meet disparate social priorities. It is a process and perspective, not an end state. It reflects the acceptance that we are a metropolitan nation, and we might as well make the best of it. **L**