

PLAN10001 – Cities Past and Future

Study Notes

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Cities as Historical Processes

Definition – City

A dense and comparatively permanent settlement in which population, institutions, exchange, infrastructure and political authority are concentrated. No single population threshold works across every period or country; the defining point is the concentration of urban functions and relationships.

A city is not only a collection of buildings. Streets, allotments, transport lines and open spaces give urban life a physical setting, but their form reflects decisions about property, labour, movement, government, public health and belonging. The same street can be a transport corridor, a boundary between social groups, a commercial address, a place of memory and an ecological system. Urban history therefore joins spatial evidence to social, economic, political and environmental explanation.

Urbanisation describes the growth of urban populations and the increasing organisation of society through towns and cities. It may involve migration from rural districts, population growth within cities, the reclassification of settlements, or the spread of urban economies and institutions into formerly rural areas. **Metropolitanisation** goes further: a central city becomes functionally connected to suburbs, satellite centres, industrial districts and peri-urban land through commuting, infrastructure, markets and governance.

Key concept – Urban form records power

The layout of land is never a neutral container. A grid may simplify subdivision and sale; a boulevard may improve circulation while clearing poorer districts; a park may provide recreation while raising nearby land values. Physical change must be read together with ownership, authority and distribution.

Five dimensions of urban change

Dimension	Questions that reveal change	Typical evidence
Spatial	How are streets, lots, buildings, centres, edges and open spaces arranged? What has been connected, divided or removed?	Maps, plans, aerial photographs, cadastral records, surviving fabric
Social and cultural	Who lives, works and meets here? Which identities and everyday practices give the place meaning? Who feels welcome or excluded?	Census records, oral histories, newspapers, literature, photographs
Economic	How are land, housing and labour valued? Which industries or forms of finance drive development? Where are costs and gains distributed?	Rate books, land sales, business records, employment data, property advertisements
Political and institutional	Who can plan, acquire, regulate, fund or veto? Which property rights and governing arrangements shape implementation?	Legislation, council minutes, planning schemes, inquiries, correspondence
Environmental	How do water, terrain, climate, pollution, vegetation and hazards constrain or enable settlement? Whose exposure is reduced or increased?	Topographic maps, engineering records, environmental studies, health reports

These dimensions rarely move at the same speed. A railway can be laid in a few years, while the subdivision pattern around it may influence development for a century. A factory may close quickly, yet contamination, worker housing and local identity remain. A planning idea can circulate internationally, but its local form changes as it encounters law, land ownership, climate and community resistance.

Chronology without inevitability

Broad chronology matters because causes must precede their effects and because institutions accumulate. Ancient civic centres, industrial transport systems, suburban allotments and post-industrial redevelopment belong to different historical conditions. Yet urban history is not a ladder in which each stage replaces an inferior one. Canals remain useful after railways appear; informal street life can survive a master plan; old property boundaries can defeat an ambitious reconstruction. Several urban systems usually coexist.