

University of British Columbia
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE Fall 2009

LARC 581B
Th 9:00 to 12:00

Sustainable Urban Design Seminar (3)
McMillan Room 358

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Research Questions:

Choose from one of the following research questions for your project, or choose from option A and B as indicated below.

1. Question: By what rate did different US and Canadian cities disperse across landscapes reducing densities. Was there a direct correlation between dropping densities and highway construction, or were other factors involved. Use my article and book as a starting point for this but add evidence, contrary evidence would be appreciated.
2. Question: Sprawl created much reduced average rates of transit ridership. Are these rates still dropping? What was the lowest ebb nationally in Canada, in US. What metro area and which of its suburbs have the lowest rates of transit ridership in US and Canada. What are the attributes of this suburb. Income? Road networks? Land use mix. How does this metro area compare to others of its size. What explains any differences. Use references in the book as a point of departure but add substantially to this list.
3. Question: Track the change in commute distances of US and Canadian cities. Compare the two countries in this indicator. During what decade was this increase at its greatest. Is there a direct correlation between commute times and commute distance? (congestion plays a role here)
4. Question: Many US commentators attribute the movement of middle class Americans to suburbs from traditional neighbourhoods to "white flight", a desire of whites to move away from urban blacks. Is there a way to distinguish between movement away from center cities provoked by race and the inducements towards peripheral areas induced by roads and finance
5. Question: Chart the increase or decrease in the proportion of an average family budget attributable to transportation. Chart this for countries and for different metropolitan areas. Add European statistics. Can these differences be tied to average density in a metro standard metropolitan statistical area? (SMSA area)
6. Question: Some say that urban growth boundaries and in BC the Agricultural Land Reserve increase the cost of housing. Analyze the state of the debate on this topic as it stands. Do urban growth boundaries and ALR lands increase the cost of housing? Or do they increase just the cost of single family homes and not housing per se?
7. Question: The assertion is that Boston suburbs are de facto (meaning maybe nobody did it on purpose...but somehow it happened) segregated by income and class. Examine to what degree this is the case. Using census information find the most glaring example of this phenomenon in the Boston area. Also challenge this hypothesis, searching to find if the hypotheses that small communities outside of Boston are segregated by income is even true.
8. Chart the phenomenon of the change in the urban landscape from one where most places were "walkable" to one where walking became impossible. What percentage of Americans or Canadians lived in "sprawl" in the 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s etc. What year did the majority live in "sprawl". How do you define sprawl in a way that it can be applied to this question. What statistical indicators of this shift can be found? Transit trips, car ownership, dwelling size, area density, energy used per capita, obesity, etc.
9. Question: Is it true that density, walking distance to commercial services were never considered during the build up of the highway system? Where were there times when alternatives were seriously considered? If so why were they not built. What forces prevented the creation of a more complete

and multi modal landscape where walking was an option.

10. Question: Are Detroit and St Louis the worst examples of this phenomenon? What of Cleveland. Are there any Canadian examples? Calgary? Regina? How closely can you correlate this "doughnut hole" phenomenon with highway construction. With the lack of political or geo morphological constraints, the absence of land use control policies, etc.
11. Is there an aerial morphology of politics? I used the aerial photo of Atlanta as a rorschach image of the politics of a culture that hates regulation. Is this even true? Is there evidence that ties specific patterns of development to a regional politics? The images of Atlanta compared at the same scale to an image of Portland suggests that there is. Is this broadly discoverable?
12. Question: Experts debate whether car use is still increasing on a per capita basis. What is the real story. Or does this car dependence differ from one metropolitan area to another. If so what are the characteristics of the "best" performing area. The worst.
13. Question: What is the trend in car ownership over the decades in both Canada in the US. What percentage of the family income is attributable to car use over decades and how does this compare to housing costs during the same decades. If you look at the decades and combine the cost of the house with the cost of the car were the houses really cheaper than in urban areas? True in some metro areas and not others. Use the references in the book as a point of departure.
14. Question: What is the sociology of being in suburban locations where, if you are a woman without a car or a teen or whoever with no access to cars. Is the negative consequences of this overstated? Do people effectively socialize on the street? Do teens? How can we make fair statements about the social "isolation" of the cul de sac. Penny Gurstein at UBC Planning has written on this topic.
15. Question: Certain research connects obesity to sprawl. How compelling is this research. How can the influence of sprawl be separated from the influence of diet or lack of physical energy generally (the x box problem).
16. Question: Cities as diverse as Vancouver and Houston have promoted the idea of building highways as a way to relieve congestion. What metro areas have done this successfully. Has Houston? Phoenix? Atlanta? Vancouver? Seattle? Which metro area has successfully built its way out of congestion (Houston is often cited as the only successful metro area to have done so).
17. Question: Chart the change in the amount of land devoted to the car over the decades. How many parking spaces per car are there in various metro areas. What cities use the most of their land for cars and parking. Is LA the worst example still? What is the highest percentage of land given over to parking and roads in the US. In Canada.
18. Question: Compare the costs of transportation to productivity in the US and Canada as compared to European countries. How much higher is the percentage of national wealth devoted to movement in the US and Canada when compared to European countries....as a percentage of GNP.
19. Question: Who are the experts that are calling the situation a crisis. Why do they use this word. What calamitous probable outcomes do they foresee. Are they credible and taken seriously in government circles? If so how is government responding? Providing more money? Allowing the system to decay? Changing their concepts of transportation?
20. Question: Can we chart the change in average lot size over the sprawl period from 1950 to 2000? Are there regional differences in this trend? Does this trend not hold true anywhere

Option A: Pick a question of your own choosing drawn from somewhere in the book. Submit to me for review and approval by e mail.

Option B. Come up with a similar scope of question that pertains to a current interest you have in sustainable urbanism.