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Zoning, Land Use, and the Reproduction of Urban Inequality

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Abstract

Zoning determines what can be built where, and is ubiquitous in the United States. Low-density residential zoning predominates in US cities far more than in other countries, limiting housing opportunities for those who cannot afford large homes. These zoning regulations have racist and classist origins, make housing more expensive, and reinforce segregation patterns. While sociologists study these consequences of zoning, and other causes of unaffordable housing and segregation, they rarely examine zoning itself. This article argues for a sociological research agenda on zoning and land use.

Keywords

zoning; land use; housing; segregation; inequality; stratification

INTRODUCTION

Zoning and land use have received increased attention as key processes that affect where people can live and how much they pay for housing. They have long been studied by planning scholars and housing economists, with the latter's models of supply and demand forming the theoretical basis for the cost of housing. In these models, zoning and land use regulations restrict housing supply, which will drive up housing's price when coupled with strong demand.

Housing has been a core topic of concern for urban sociologists since the earliest days. But zoning and land use are rarely a focus of this literature. This is an important oversight, given zoning's effect on housing affordability and location. The rising cost of housing is contributing to greater stratification by income and wealth, between property owners and tenants, rich and poor, and various racial groups. Zoning and land use are also weaponized to maintain spatial stratification, through both increasing housing affordability and segregating housing types. These outcomes are key to urban sociology, yet the field largely ignores these key structures that produce them.

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Zoning and land use are glaring omissions, particularly given the significant attention sociologists pay to housing location. These studies comprise a large body of research on segregation, neighborhood effects, and other forms of spatial stratification. As far back as 1980, Foley would write about the sociology of housing that "there is increasing recognition that 'housing' comprises much more than physical shelter and that it especially encompasses the broader residential setting" (Foley 1980, p. 457). Today, as a result of the past four decades of research on spatial stratification, this point is now obvious to anyone with even minimal knowledge of sociological research on housing. This subfield has given new meaning to the old adage about real estate, that the three most important factors are "location, location, location." Housing location is heavily influenced by zoning and land use decisions, yet few sociologists study it, instead leaving this to planners, economists, and legal scholars. Sociologists study the consequences of zoning, including segregation and precarious housing conditions. And they study some of its causes, including urban political economy and municipal governance. But they ignore the institution itself. This is a limitation for urban sociology, one that also deprives planners and economists of a sociological perspective on zoning.

The planning field needs sociologists to pay more attention, as zoning and land use practices are exacerbating social stratification and in need of reform. Furthermore, a sociology of housing is incomplete without a focus on zoning and land use. Sociology is about social structures, yet the sociological study of housing and segregation ignores its biggest structural factors. An agenda for the sociological study of zoning and land use should include the power dynamics between various actors in planning and land use decision-making, planning processes ostensibly meant to empower low-income communities, the appropriate role of property in modern society, the role of zoning and land use in social exclusion, and the interplay between widening inequality and zoning and land use.

THE ORIGINS AND PRACTICE OF AMERICAN ZONING AND LAND USE

Zoning and land use determine what can be built where, and zoning is nearly universal in cities, towns, and suburbs in Western, higher-income countries. Although some zoning practices can be traced back to antiquity, modern zoning began in late-nineteenth-century Germany and England (Hirt 2015). The industrial revolution was an impetus for early zoning codes—people were increasingly working away from home, and industrial uses for land were increasingly toxic and disruptive to residential life. This gradually led to the separation of residential, commercial, and industrial uses, enforced by local ordinances.

In the United States, many early justifications for zoning—and for the broader development of the field that would become city planning—were similarly to promote public health. Gans (1994) highlights further motives in pursuit of the public good and health—many US cities had exploded in population during the nineteenth century and were built with minimal central planning or coordination. The result was housing placed in close proximity to noxious land uses, and cities characterized by chaotic transportation systems and dangerous slums that were hotbeds for crime and disease. In New York City, work by Jacob Riis (1890) drew attention to the latter concerns, helping lead to the Tenement House Act in 1901, which

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was the third and most comprehensive attempt to regulate the construction of tenements in the city (Hirt 2015).

Several scholars have placed this juncture of planning in the context of the larger progressive reform movement to produce better, less corrupt governance in US cities (Fairfield 1994, Schlereth 1981, von Hoffman 2009). Hirt (2015) points to height limits in Chicago; Washington, DC; and Boston near the dawn of the twentieth century as further examples of growing attention to city planning through building codes. In 1907, the planning profession and processes became more institutionalized, when Hartford, Connecticut, implemented the first permanent planning commission; prior to this decision, planning commissions would form only briefly, to write and adopt a general plan, and then disband (Am. Plan. Assoc. 2021).

These milestones are key to the development of planning practice and the proliferation of zoning and land use policy more generally, but much of what occurred during this time involved regulating the location of industry and the size of commercial buildings. Residential land use regulations (the focus of this article) were implemented early in the twentieth century in most cities and have grown massively in coverage and scope ever since. Key milestones that set the stage for the ubiquity of zoning in the United States include the implementation of New York's zoning code in 1916; the US Supreme Court's *Buchanan v. Warley* (1917) decision that struck down racial zoning; and, nine years later, the Court's Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty Co. (1926) decision that solidified the constitutionality of zoning. While the Court, in *Buchanan,* made it much more difficult for cities to explicitly enforce racial boundaries with zoning maps, as cities across the South had been doing for years, cities still had at least two tools. The first was restrictive covenants that stopped property owners from selling to particular racial groups. The second tool came from *Euclid,* which gave jurisdictions wide latitude in specifying land uses and the location of housing types, allowing for justifications to fit under the broad umbrella of "health, safety, and general welfare" (Fischel 2015, p. 110).

The Racial Origins of Zoning

There is debate about the extent to which racial and economic exclusion drove zoning's ubiquity, but there is ample evidence that it did. The first evidence comes from some of the earliest zoning codes in the South. These were not the comprehensive plans that would come later in New York City and proliferate across the country, but they show the racial motivations of zoning. What the Court struck down in *Buchanan* commonly existed in Southern (or near Southern) US cities, most famously in Baltimore, Maryland, and Louisville, Kentucky. Louisville's law was simple—on a block that was majority White, an owner could not sell to Blacks, and on a block that was majority Black, an owner could not sell to Whites (Fischel 2015).

Silver (1991) uses primary sources from the post-*Buchanan* era to show that Southern cities embraced planning as a way to solidify residential boundaries between Blacks and Whites. He argues that while Southern cities were the first to embrace these practices, it was largely because that was where the Black population was concentrated at that time. Furthermore, he provides evidence that it was Northern progressive planners who were often brought in

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to implement planning practices that would pass the *Buchanan* test but still preserve racial residential segregation. These practices included not only zoning and land use but slum clearance and the siting of public housing, roads, and segregated schools. The sheer volume of racially explicit zoning ordinances created before they were deemed unconstitutional suggests that only the naïve among us would assume that future zoning policies were racially neutral in goal and outcome. Restrictive covenants would proliferate throughout the country but were not adequate substitutes for racial zoning, which required far more cooperation among individual homeowners. Silver notes that several major cities in the South either implemented or considered racial zoning ordinances after Baltimore's in 1910. It is highly unlikely that these cities would have simply given up on the idea of using zoning to separate races because of *Buchanan*. In fact, Silver notes that many major cities and counties (predominantly in the South), such as Atlanta, Indianapolis, Norfolk, Richmond, New Orleans, Winston-Salem, Dallas, Charleston (South Carolina), Dade County (Florida), and Birmingham (Alabama) all passed racial zoning ordinances after 1917. A big difference after *Buchanan* was the use of professional planners to craft zoning ordinances that would stand up in court and to engage in comprehensive planning practices that not only delineated land uses but planned locations of roads, parks, and other major infrastructure. In 1922 Atlanta attempted to merely recode their residential districts into R1 (White), R2 (Coloured), and R3 (Undetermined). While these did not outlast court challenges, the use of R1 and R2 has symbolic importance in zoning given single-family zones are typically coded as R1 on American land use maps. Importantly, these practices did not stay in the South—as the Great Migration brought millions of Blacks from the rural South to Northern cities, Northern planners replicated the practices that many of them had designed in the South.

The first comprehensive zoning plan, in 1916 New York City, came at a time when the Supreme Court was examining the *Buchanan* case and foreshadowed how Northern planners would use zoning to separate by race and class. New York's plan was motivated primarily by real estate and commercial entities that wanted to shape and control skyscraper development near the central business districts in lower and midtown Manhattan. Much of the written history of the 1916 ordinance suggests that the goals here were largely benign, such as controlling congestion and separating incompatible uses from one another. But Fischler (1998), a scholar of New York's pioneering zoning code, argues that economic and racial exclusion lurked underneath these rationales:

> Class- and race-based exclusion was a conscious rationale of building and land-use regulation from its very first days. It was not its only rationale, but it was an important one. And it was not always a goal unto itself, serving often as a means to an end: Because proximity to people of a lower social status diminished the market value of property, the stability of prices depended on the preservation of safe distances between socioeconomic racial groups. (Fischler 1998, p. 676)

Much of the anger about existing conditions in New York's central business districts concerned the throngs of garment workers descending upon the area during their lunch breaks, and Fischler (1998, p. 685) quotes a business association leader aiming to "clear the avenue" of "men standing on the sidewalk and the roadway debating in strange tongues." Furthermore, the familiar fights against apartment dwellings (and their dwellers) occurred in

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Murray Hill at this time. Representing an existing single-family neighborhood, the Murray Hill Association fought fervently against multifamily development.

Shertzer et al. (2016) use quantitative data to study the racially disparate impacts of Chicago's 1923 comprehensive zoning plan. Using block-level land use data before and after the plan's implementation, they estimate the effect of the racial makeup of a neighborhood on zoning outcomes. Given they are able to control for preexisting density, they account for the fact that minority populations tend to settle in higher-density locations, as those areas are typically less expensive—and Chicago was already racially segregated when zoning was adopted. They find strong connections between race and zoned density: A one standard deviation increase in a neighborhood's Black share made it 27% more likely that a neighborhood would be zoned for higher density. Interestingly, the presence of European immigrants had the reverse effect. Smaller, but still significant, effects were found on the likelihood that neighborhoods with a higher share of Blacks would be zoned for manufacturing. These zoning decisions doubled down on existing high-density use patterns in disproportionately Black areas and further protected White neighborhoods from multifamily housing that could house Black migrants. Indeed, in further work, Shertzer et al. (2018) conclude that these racial origins contributed to the intensity of Chicago's segregated landscape for decades beyond.

Single-Family Zoning

Single-family zoning is a designation in the zoning code that prohibits anything but a detached single-family home from being built on a parcel of land (Manville et al. 2020). However, single-family zoning is not the only way that local governments restrict the types of housing that can be built in a place. In addition to the number of distinct units that can be constructed on a parcel of land, zoning can govern building shape, height, and width or depth. And minimum setback requirements govern where the building can begin (i.e., how far it must be set back from the property line). Other common techniques include defining a ratio of built to open space, or floor-to-area ratio and defining the minimum size of the land unit on which a building could be placed (minimum lot sizes). These mechanisms have various effects on the potential for multifamily housing to be built in cities where land is typically scarce—they all make it more difficult or expensive to build more housing on smaller plots of land, and of course single-family zoning bans this outright. Multifamily housing is less costly and is therefore more likely to be attainable for lower-income households and racial minorities (given they are more likely to be poor).

Apartment bans in the form of single-family zoning get more attention in planning history and research, so I discuss those most often in the following, but in most cases, single-family zoning is adopted in concert with the other restrictions on density noted above. And in basically all cities, even areas zoned to allow multifamily housing have other restrictions on size, shape, and aesthetics. Rothstein (2017) argues that single-family zoning has not only had disproportionate impacts on the poor and racial minorities, but that this was commonly the intent all along. He notes that St. Louis's planning engineer Harland Bartholomew—over one year prior to *Buchanan*—stated explicitly that his goal was to prevent the encroachment of Blacks into all-White neighborhoods. In St. Louis, neighborhoods comprised largely of

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single-family housing with restrictive racial covenants were the most protected, thereby prohibiting any multifamily dwellings in those all-White neighborhoods. St. Louis also placed industrial zones near existing Black neighborhoods around this time. Although many of the arguments for single-family zoning made at the time were economic, racial separation was accomplished through the same means, and zoning proponents were on record as being very much in favor of segregated cities.

In 1926, the *Euclid* decision not only established the constitutionality of zoning, but famously (for a Supreme Court decision about zoning) enshrined anti-apartment sentiment into American jurisprudence. While protecting single-family neighborhoods was not always explicitly race or class-based, Fischel (2015) argues that in a post-*Buchanan* environment, racial covenants were not likely viewed as an adequate substitute for maintaining racially segregated neighborhoods. Racial covenants were typically restrictions on deeds to the sale of property to racial minorities. These were widely used and legal until the *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948) decision but were of limited effectiveness due to holdouts and had a high cost of administration—it can be hard to locate and organize numerous property owners. Fischel points to the fact that zoning was common even in areas with high coverage by private covenants as evidence that zoning provided an additional protection against unwanted development that covenants could not match.

In 1924, the Ambler Realty Company sued the Village of Euclid over their zoning ordinance, which restricted land held by Ambler to residential use. Ambler bought the property with the intention of selling the property for industrial use. In spite of this, Justice George Sutherland included in his majority opinion a rant against multifamily dwellings, in defense of the detached single-family home. Justice Sutherland wrote,

> With particular reference to apartment houses, it is pointed out that the development of detached house sections is greatly retarded by the coming of apartment houses, which has sometimes resulted in destroying the entire section for private house purposes; that in such sections very often the apartment house is a mere parasite, constructed in order to take advantage of the open spaces and attractive surroundings created by the residential character of the district. Moreover, the coming of one apartment house is followed by others, interfering by their height and bulk with the free circulation of air and monopolizing the rays of the sun which otherwise would fall upon the smaller homes, and bringing, as their necessary accompaniments, the disturbing noises incident to increased traffic and business, and the occupation, by means of moving and parked automobiles, of larger portions of the streets, thus detracting from their safety and depriving children of the privilege of quiet and open spaces for play, enjoyed by those in more favored localities—until, finally, the residential character of the neighborhood and its desirability as a place of detached residences are utterly destroyed. Under these circumstances, apartment houses, which in a different environment would be not only entirely unobjectionable but highly desirable, come very near to being nuisances. [Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty Co. (1926, pp. 394–95)]

Hirt (2015, p. 166) argues that “this ruling elevated the detached single-family home as the most desirable form of human habitation and placed apartments in a category that

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was alien to the ‘true’ residential districts.” She goes on to quote jurists, civil engineers, and public figures of the time who very clearly saw the potential for apartment bans to also ban particular types of people from places and establish or replicate patterns of racial and economic segregation. It is not only with the benefit of hindsight that we evaluate single-family zoning as a contributor to economic and racial exclusion—decision-makers explicitly considered this at the time, and for some, it was part of the appeal.

Most comparable countries dedicate significant portions of their urban areas to single-family housing, but the United States is an extreme user of single-family zoning. This is not because the United States is an ownership society. Homeownership rates are higher in Spain, Belgium, Norway, Ireland, Italy, Israel, Australia, Canada, England, and a handful of other countries. The European Union’s average homeownership rate is over five points higher than in the United States (Hirt 2015). However, the share of detached single-family homes in the United States is over 63%, compared with 55% in Canada and 27% in the United Kingdom. While Australia and some countries have a higher share of housing units that are detached single-family homes, few comparable countries are within 10 percentage points of the US share (Hirt 2015). The form of the detached single-family home is what is unique about the United States, and not housing tenure. This strongly suggests that zoning takes a different form in the United States. Inspection of urban zoning maps makes it clear that large swaths of US urban areas ban anything but a detached single-family home. San Jose is the tenth most populous city in the United States, and approximately 94% of the city’s residential land is zoned for detached single-family housing. Los Angeles, Seattle, and Charlotte range from 75% (Los Angeles) to 84% (Charlotte). Even seemingly apartment-filled cities like San Francisco and Washington, DC set aside over one-third of their residential space for detached single-family homes (Badger & Bui 2019, Manville et al. 2020).

If the ubiquity of the single-family detached home is indeed due in large part to zoning and not just preferences, then government policy bears responsibility for negative effects that arise from the single-family home. At a minimum, single-family zoning forces households to buy housing in larger quantities than they might otherwise prefer (at a larger expense), makes housing more scarce (and likely more expensive), and favors an environmentally less sustainable housing product and urban form (Manville et al. 2020). There is considerable evidence that single-family zoning constrains locational outcomes for low-income families and racial minorities, entrenching and replicating segregated living patterns across the country. Sociologists study a vast array of consequences to unaffordable housing including gentrification (Zukin 2016), homelessness (Stuart 2016), eviction (Desmond 2012), and crowded housing (Harvey 2020). But they have very little to say about the forces driving up housing costs. Segregation stands out as the most common area of focus, arguably forming the core of sociology research on housing.

SOCIOLOGY OF HOUSING

Housing has been a topic of interest by sociologists roughly as long as the field has existed. Marx obviously dealt extensively with issues of property ownership, the housing side of which Engels (1872) addressed in *The Housing Question*. Issues raised by Engels in 1872 are surely relevant to questions on housing and zoning today. Engels wrote of squalid and

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dangerous housing conditions faced by wage workers in England and Germany—conditions that were undoubtedly improved by the segregation of residential and industrial land uses brought about through zoning. And he foreshadowed many debates over single-family zoning and homeownership by pushing against the notion that wage workers would be better off if they could own their homes.

In the United States, sociological studies of housing dealt less with affordability or ownership than location and segregation—and, in the earlier days, housing conditions. For several decades, overcrowding and unsafe housing conditions have been much less common and less of a focus for scholars. Housing precarity is back as a central focus of sociologists, including studies of homelessness (Stuart 2016) and eviction (Desmond 2016, Desmond & Gershenson 2017).

Drivers of housing costs are largely the purview of economists, though the work of Gilderbloom & Appelbaum (1987) is a notable exception, and they directly address the role of housing supply. They disagree with economists that rental markets are competitive, because in many markets, landlords have too much economic power. They defend this assertion by running regression models on 140 US cities that estimate the effect of demographic and housing market characteristics on median monthly rents. They find no relationship between housing supply variables and rents. But they do find that the degree of landlord professionalization plays a big role. They measure this by calculating the percent of a city's rental stock that is comprised of 10 or more units at a single address (or 50 or more units in another model). This is an indicator of rental industry concentration in the hands of fewer landlords. There is likely endogeneity and measurement error that limit the precision of these findings, but the market power of few landlords is likely higher with stricter zoning, which increases the barriers to entry into the rental business.

Pattillo (2013) discusses the tensions in both scholarship and practice when considering housing as a commodity versus a right. She does discuss the role of zoning and housing supply but, unfortunately, dismisses it as a major issue, arguing that since there were 18 million vacant housing units in the United States, supply did not seem to be much of a problem. First, it should be noted that these were numbers coming as the housing market was still settling after the Great Recession. Second, vacancy numbers are always more complicated than the aggregate numbers suggest (Phillips 2020). Third, she rightly highlights the mismatch between the housing prices of existing homes and the prices that low-income people can afford, and that this mismatch is growing over time. However, she does not link this to zoning, which is likely the biggest culprit in this caper. The market is disproportionately producing units for higher-income people because that is often the only housing that zoning will allow. And then, when no housing is allowed at all, the existing housing stock becomes expensive whether it is nice or not. I can find a listing for a 158-square-foot studio priced at $1,298 per month in Venice, CA, not because the listing agent has a sense of humor, but because there have been nearly zero housing units added to the area's stock in the past 30 years. Figure 1 displays this, along with the astronomical growth in rents and income.

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But the big story in sociology's housing research is about location. For over a century, US sociology has focused on describing the neighborhood environment and the influence of the neighborhood unit on household outcomes, bringing attention to the intertwined relationships between race, class, and spatial stratification. Du Bois (1899), in *The Philadelphia Negro*, used the concentration of Blacks in Philadelphia as a research setting to study the condition of Blacks in relation to their White counterparts and make a case for Black uplift. The result was a landmark ethnography of a people and neighborhood that would foreshadow the urban neighborhoods after the Great Migration, which had yet to begin in earnest. Steil & Charles (2021) note that Du Bois's study of urban, residential segregation informed his broader critiques of racial and social stratification.

The Chicago School focused heavily on the spatial organization of opportunities, dangers, and various groups. Park & Burgess (1925, p. 27) had "neighborhoods, racial communities, and segregated city areas" as central matters of focus and made reference to the practices of zoning. Furthermore, likely influenced by the fast-moving developments in zoning and land use, the early sociologists conceptualized a city in concentric zones, with a central business district and zones for factories, working class, residential, and commuters. Venkatesh (2001) argues that Burgess and his colleagues were planners themselves, splitting Chicago into 74 community areas that are still in use to this day. Given the widespread use of the names and boundaries by a wide variety of actors, Venkatesh (2001, p. 277) argues that the scholars engaged in a "social construction" of the city.

From these foundations, sociological studies of housing, space, class, and race generally fall into three areas: studies of particular neighborhoods, often ethnographic; segregation studies that measure the degree to which people of different racial and economic groups live apart; and neighborhood effects, which study the role of neighborhood environments in helping or hindering individual success. Most of these studies neglect the role of zoning.

There is a robust tradition of urban ethnographies that tell urgent stories about what it is like to live outside boundaries of racial exclusion. Drake & Cayton (1945) follow Du Bois's (1899) *Philadelphia Negro* and advance a sociological framework for studying Black life and the external forces that constrain these neighborhoods. New York (Clark 1965) and Chicago have gotten much attention over the years, but there are also notable studies of the ill-fated Pruitt–Igoe public housing development in St. Louis (Rainwater 1970) and studies of neighborhoods in Washington, DC (Hannerz 1970, Liebow 1967). In this ethnographic tradition, there was often a focus on joblessness and the fractured Black family, but inadequate and segregated housing conditions played a central role as well. As the war on drugs, crime, and violence subsumed many Black neighborhoods through the introduction of heroin in the 1970s and the crack epidemic in the 1980s, the focus tended to shift accordingly (Anderson 1990, 1999; Kotlowitz 1991; Sullivan 1989; Venkatesh 2000, 2008, 2009). More recently, gentrification and displacement have been a common area of focus for studies of urban neighborhoods (Chaskin & Joseph 2015, Freeman 2006, Hyra 2017, Pattillo 2007). While zoning is one mechanism (among many) that shapes these neighborhoods, it is not a point emphasized in this literature.

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The sociological literature on segregation is too voluminous to summarize here. Sociologists have been responsible for several advances in segregation measurement (Duncan & Duncan 1955, Farley 1977, Logan et al. 2004, Massey & Denton 1988, Reardon & O'Sullivan 2004, Winship 1977). While sociologists have used these tools to examine the persistence of American urban segregation and its causes, they have not dwelt much on the role of zoning. Wilson (1987) zeroed in on the role of inner-city joblessness in creating an urban underclass, spatially and socially cut off from people of higher socioeconomic status of all races. Massey & Denton (1993) argue that the persistence of racial segregation and discrimination played a decisive role in solidifying overlapping patterns of racial segregation and concentrated poverty. If, for Wilson, the poverty was the problem, for Massey and Denton, racial segregation caused or exacerbated the poverty in the first place. Charles (2003) and Alba et al. (1999) have tested whether place stratification or spatial assimilation theories better describe how racial minorities and immigrants, respectively, become more or less integrated into higher-income or Whiter neighborhoods. Zoning is a missing mechanism from these analyses.

The sociological literature on neighborhood effects is also vast.[1] Its policy orientation is largely tied to housing mobility programs, though there is also a smaller literature on the Fair Housing Act that more directly confronts issues pertaining to zoning and land use. Research on housing mobility studies housing vouchers as a lever to move lower-income households to higher-income neighborhoods. The core of this research is formed by the highly influential Moving to Opportunity (MTO) study, which randomly assigned households living in public housing to three groups (one voucher, one voucher with a low neighborhood poverty threshold, one control) to assess the effect of moving to lower-poverty neighborhoods (Sanbonmatsu et al. 2011).[2] While housing vouchers make housing more affordable and a greater number of neighborhoods more accessible, changes to zoning and land use would likely do the same but are not the focus of research on neighborhood effects.

The voluminous research on neighborhood effects (and more specifically MTO) is very relevant to zoning and, more directly, fair housing. First, this research establishes an evidence base for why segregation matters in the first place. MTO highlights the role of neighborhood in physical and mental health outcomes (Sanbonmatsu et al. 2011) and effects on college attendance and future earnings, particularly for those who move while still young (Chetty et al. 2016). Research on MTO and other housing mobility programs has also provided substantial evidence about the residential decision-making process undertaken by low-income households, particularly shedding light on the difficulty that these households have in gaining access to higher-opportunity neighborhoods even when provided resources and information to do so (DeLuca & Rosenblatt 2017, DeLuca et al. 2019). These findings on residential decision-making make it clear that low-income households would still need help to find housing in higher-income neighborhoods, even if better zoning practices made those places less expensive.

[1]For an excellent summary, readers are directed to Sharkey & Faber (2014).

[2]Desmond (2016, p. 293) famously quipped that "every family who benefited from Moving to Opportunity could have their own study in which their program was mentioned." He based this on a Google Scholar search returning over 4,800 articles and books including "Moving to Opportunity" in the text (4,600 families were enrolled in the study).

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There is also plenty of research on neighborhood effects that does not directly test the role of housing policy. Sharkey (2013), using the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, finds strong evidence that neighborhood disadvantage is handed down through generations in Black households and such disadvantage decreases the likelihood that Black children will have better outcomes than their parents. Sampson (2012), using data from his Project on Human Development in Chicago's Neighborhoods (PHDCN), emphasizes the spatial correlation of neighborhood effects, concluding that even disadvantaged White neighborhoods are often surrounded by relatively affluent and stable ones, while relatively advantaged Black neighborhoods are often surrounded by or proximate to relatively disadvantaged ones.

Ultimately, sociology's narrow policy focus on housing mobility programs leaves out residential decision-making processes that are far more typical and have far more impact on segregation in urban areas. Approximately 2.2 million households pay for housing with the help of the Housing Choice Voucher Program (Cent. Budg. Policy Priorities 2021), leaving roughly 120 million other US households who do not. The vast, vast majority of those remaining households—even those with low incomes—either own or rent their homes on private rental markets shaped by zoning and land use. It is possible we would not need so many more vouchers if our zoning policies were different. And there are still many places where people could never live with the most generous vouchers, because there are so few homes.

ZONING AND LAND USE

Zoning and land use are not absent from sociology. A handful of sociologists—Gans, Molotch, and Logan—have written extensively about zoning and land use. Furthermore, there is a broader literature on fair housing that is largely conducted by legal scholars but includes contributions from sociologists and social scientists. I discuss these in turn.

Molotch is deeply critical of zoning practices in the United States, due to their tendency to produce more development, not less. He centers his critique on two grounds: the environmental degradation that rapid growth can sometimes cause and the power wielded in US cities by what he and Logan term the "growth machine" (Logan & Molotch 1987, p. vii). In *Urban Fortunes*, Logan & Molotch (1987) warn us of the outsized power and influence of the growth machine—a coalition of government and business elites whose fortunes are tied to land value in the region, including developers, media, labor unions, and large landowners. These economic interests lead them to push for local economic growth above all other considerations. A key way they achieve this is to capture the zoning and land use regulatory process through political influence. This has clear potential for further economic or spatial stratification, given that lower-income neighborhoods are unable to exert influence against growth machine strategies that may impact them. Their neighborhoods can be redeveloped for higher and better uses, whether or not that benefits, displaces, or otherwise harms the residents of that neighborhood.

In their alarm over the power and influence of the growth machine, Logan & Molotch (1987) dismiss several arguments in favor of growth. First, they do not accept that robust housing production is necessary when demand is high to keep house prices from getting out of

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control. This is conventional wisdom in the economics literature, where several studies have found that stringent land use regulations commonly contribute to housing shortages in US metropolitan areas, and those shortages make housing more expensive (Been et al. 2019, Kahn et al. 2010, Kok et al. 2014, Saiz 2010). There has been much research on the effect of housing supply on prices since Logan and Molotch wrote in 1987, but supply effects on house prices were well known in the economics literature at the time of their writing. This is still a controversial topic—many people continue to be very skeptical of the potential for housing production to stabilize prices (Rodríguez-Pose & Storper 2020), but the empirical evidence very strongly supports the necessity of supply (Been et al. 2019, Manville et al. 2020).

Second, Logan & Molotch (1987) are convinced of the power of the growth machine, and they argue that the interests of powerful developers are served by political decision-makers and determine urban form and function. This has been challenged by Fischel (2004, 2009), who emphasizes the power of homeowners, whom Fischel terms “homevoters” to emphasize their political clout. Fischel argues that homeowners exert their influence on the zoning process to prohibit development near their biggest source of wealth (their homes). Their higher levels of wealth and political engagement enable this. One reason for the diverging opinions of Fischel and Logan and Molotch is that times have perhaps changed. Fischel and Manville & Osman (2017) argue that homeowners revolted against the growth machine and largely won in the 1970s and 1980s.

Recent empirical work supports this. Been et al. (2014) study zoning changes in New York City from 2002 to 2009, when the Bloomberg administration had pushed to upzone (increase the allowable density) in more parts of the City. Looking at over 200,000 lots across the city, they first find that downzoning (reducing the allowable density) was slightly more common than upzoning. During a time when a pro–growth machine strategy was on the agenda, New York City, the densest city in the country, was relatively unsuccessful in unlocking more land for more intense development. Been et al. (2014) are explicitly interested in testing whether Fischel’s homevoter hypothesis or Logan and Molotch’s growth machine hypothesis better explains where upzonings and downzonings occurred. If the homevoter hypothesis was more explanatory, we would expect upzonings in areas with low homeownership rates and downzonings in areas with high rates. The growth machine would want to capitalize on existing public investments like transit stations, parks, and quality schools, which is exactly where homevoters would want to fight upzonings, to keep those amenities exclusive. Been et al. (2014) run regression models to see which neighborhood attributes are most associated with upzoning and downzoning during this period. They find that neighborhoods with high homeownership rates, percentage White, and voter turnout are less likely to be upzoned and more likely to be downzoned. They thus find clear support for the homevoter hypothesis; none of their results support the idea that the growth machine was successful in steering zoning changes in ways that would benefit them.

While those findings apply to a particular time and place, Gabbe (2018) conducted a similar study in Los Angeles over a longer time period—2002 to 2014. He ran a set of logistic regression models where the dependent variable was whether that parcel was upzoned. He first found that upzoning was very rare in Los Angeles—only about 1% of the city’s

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land area was upzoned in 12 years—during a time when the city's political leadership was making statements in support of building more to capitalize on transit investments.[3] Also like Been et al., Gabbe finds no support for the growth machine's influence—there were no significant relationships between freeway access, rail and Bus Rapid Transit proximity, or employment accessibility and upzoning, and parcels near high-performing schools were less likely to be upzoned. In support of the homevoter hypothesis, Gabbe found that parcels in neighborhoods with higher homeownership rates were much less likely to be upzoned.

Logan and Molotch are further motivated by environmental protection, an area in which Molotch has written more extensively (Molotch 1970, Warner & Molotch 1995). Environmental concerns are a common defense for stringent land use controls. At least two issues are relevant. First, zoning can help advance environmental justice concerns by shielding residential development near noxious land uses. Second, zoning can protect parks, open space, and wildlife by steering development away from where wildlife thrives. The most obvious example is the National Park System. However, our understanding of the relationship between urban development and the environment has evolved to focus on more than the protection of open space and include the role that urban form plays in greenhouse gas emissions and climate change. There is still much to learn about the relationship between urban density and climate change. However, it is clear that if metropolitan areas have rapid population growth, not allowing dense housing (and mandating single-family housing in particular) will push urban boundaries farther away from jobs and transit infrastructure, while also encroaching on sustainable ecosystems. Such sprawling development is likely a significant factor in greenhouse gas emissions and thus climate change (Hankey & Marshall 2010, Muñiz & Rojas 2019).

Gans, writing roughly twenty years earlier, better reflects a twenty-first-century understanding of zoning and land use—in my view, one that is more astute about the practice's potentials and failings. Specifically, Gans saw ahead to merge aspects of the homevoter and growth machine hypotheses of urban development. While I argue that Logan & Molotch's (1987) growth machine theory does a poor job of explaining the politics of urban development and takes an extreme view of the negative byproducts of urban growth, there is no question that powerful business interests shape local development decisions. This concentration of power has likely broadened inequality by increasing the returns to land ownership for already affluent property holders. Gans (1969) makes forceful arguments that planners have been overly concerned with the form and efficiency of cities and that they do plan for the interests of the affluent. Importantly, he includes both upper-middle-class homeowners and business interests in the affluent, appropriately broadening the power base that commonly shapes development decisions in many cities.

His argument is that planners wrongly assume that physical spaces determine human social life and flourishing. He bases this on the history of slum clearance, borne out of the social reforms and settlement movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which held that if poor people could be moved out of unsafe and unsanitary conditions, they would live more according to middle-class values. Gans is critical—as many have

[3]Three major subway lines were added or expanded during the study period, doubling the existing number of lines.

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been—of the idea that altering these physical conditions would solve the underlying problem of poverty, which would necessitate greater income redistribution. But Gans (1969, p. 36) goes further to shine a light on how planning has been coopted by the wealthy: “Although city planning has been concerned principally with improving the physical environment, it has also been planning for certain people, although only indirectly and implicitly. These people were the planner himself, his political supporters, and the upper middle class citizen in general.”

Earlier, Gans points his finger at exclusionary zoning. About planners, he says,

> They developed master plans which segregated land uses by a variety of criteria, most of them class-based, so that upper and middle class residences were separated from working and lower class residences, affluent shopping districts from poor ones, and industry, which employed mainly working and lower class people, from everything else. (Gans 1969, p. 35)

And, merging the two issues—the overemphasis on physical environment and the exclusion of poor people and their interests—Gans states that

> They also laid out new areas of the city for future growth, although, true to their reformer ancestors who wanted to stop the influx of immigrants, they were basically against growth itself and wanted to limit the size of the city. The new areas consisted of single family houses in middle class neighbourhoods, having schools in the center, but including no housing or institutions for the poor. The planners assumed that if they planned for middle class housing, poor people would somehow become middle class and so no new low cost housing was envisaged. If the planners provided only middle class facilities, people would use nothing else. (Gans 1969, p. 35)

Gans, writing here in 1969, was well ahead of his time in offering a sociological perspective on planning that clarified how cities can be pro- and antigrowth at the same time and, through both types of regimes, serve the interests of powerful stakeholders.

The clearest contribution of sociology to understanding the relationships between exclusionary zoning and spatial stratification is research on fair housing. The 1968 Civil Rights Act forms the legal basis for fair housing processes and outcomes, on which there is a robust legal studies literature. As mentioned, there is a massive social science literature on the location of subsidized housing, but fair housing also concerns the broader scope of land use regulations that determine what can and cannot be built where. Massey et al. (2013) address each of these issues through the somewhat unique case of Mount Laurel, New Jersey.

Mount Laurel is a suburb of Camden and was initially populated by mostly White families leaving that city as it declined and became majority Black. This typical American story had a very atypical twist. In 1967, Ethel Lawrence and a group of local residents purchased a 32-acre site in Mount Laurel with the hopes of providing affordable housing. This was illegal in Mount Laurel on two grounds. First, multifamily development was allowed on only four sites in the city, and this was not one of them. Second, they required city approval to

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use state and federal subsidies to make the development affordable to their target population, and Mount Laurel had no wish to approve the development in either way. The case made its way to the New Jersey Supreme Court. In a sweeping decision, the Court took aim at exclusionary zoning across the state. The Court mandated that localities take account of regional housing needs and zone for their "fair share" (Massey et al. 2013, p. 38) of those needs, for low- and moderate-income households in particular. While it took another lawsuit to get compliance from Mount Laurel, the Ethel Lawrence Homes were eventually built. The broader implication is that New Jersey has one of the most robust fair housing legal frameworks of any state in the nation. Massey et al. (2013) is the story of how the Ethel Lawrence Homes came to be, as well as a study of the benefits accrued to the low- and middle-income households who have been able to live there.

While the Ethel Lawrence Homes are subsidized and fit into the housing mobility framework, the wide-ranging mandate of the New Jersey Supreme Court situates this book and the study in the broader discussion about zoning and land use. The authors lead with a discussion of the connections between zoning and segregation, informed by not only the planning and economics literature, but Massey's studies of these links with Rothwell, which find that low-density zoning causes higher segregation by race (Rothwell & Massey 2009) and class (Rothwell & Massey 2010). More recently, Rugh & Massey (2014) affirm that recent increases in racial integration would likely be larger if not for low-density zoning. In later work (Massey & Rugh 2017), the authors find strong evidence that racial animosity drives more restrictive low-density zoning and that this zoning causes more racial segregation, poverty concentration, and concentration of the affluent.

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY ZONING AND LAND USE

The prior section summarized much of what sociologists have written about planning, zoning, and land use in US cities, and how these frameworks contribute to racial and class stratification. While I have undoubtedly omitted some, those contributions included works by only four scholars and, in the case of Massey, additional coauthors. The field of sociology has paid some attention to zoning and land use. But it is a thin literature, as these are topics on which sociologists could make vital contributions, particularly given the important role that zoning and land use plays in social stratification.

There is much that we do not know about how zoning and land use currently contribute to widening inequality, but Section 2 summarized research on the racist and classist origins of zoning, displaying how zoning and land use can act as tools for social stratification. Given the United States was founded as a slaveholding society by White men, there are countless laws and regulations with racist origins. What is important to consider going forward is whether zoning and land use continue to have racist or classist motivations and reinforce social stratification.

Zoning and land use, as currently practiced in the United States, preserve the value of land for property owners, who are disproportionately wealthy and White, at a cost to renters, who are disproportionately poor and non-White. I speak to many of the mechanisms behind

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this logic in Section 2, but single-family zoning (Monkkonen 2019), parking requirements (Manville 2013), minimum lot sizes, and other regulations reduce housing supply and make it harder for people without means to afford housing (Been et al. 2019, Glaeser & Gyourko 2002). Section 4 established that at the local level, homeowners and (to the extent you accept the growth machine hypothesis) powerful economic interests have captured local land use decisions to the detriment of those without political and economic power. Massey & Rugh (2017) provide strong evidence that zoning continues to be motivated by racial discrimination.

These effects on housing affordability exacerbate widening wealth and income inequalities, but also provide an additional way that spatial stratification is replicated and intensified. When housing is made more scarce, living in desirable areas is less possible for those without means. In turn, those areas are more likely to remain economically and racially homogenous. US zoning and land use regimes typically take this one step further, in that the more desirable areas are the ones with stricter land use regulations. This limits access to those neighborhoods and pushes new housing into neighborhoods that have a higher share of minorities and lower-income households. Studies that have investigated the contemporary connections between land use regulations and segregation have consistently concluded that stricter, more locally driven zoning processes lead to higher levels of segregation by class (Lens & Monkkonen 2016, Rothwell & Massey 2010) and race (Massey & Rugh 2017, Pendall 2000, Rothwell & Massey 2009). This has led some to call for the abolition of single-family zoning and other density restrictions, to further racial and economic justice (Kuhlmann 2021, Manville et al. 2020).

But particularly with respect to race, this is complicated territory, as it always is. Presently, many communities that have been historically segregated, disadvantaged, and underrepresented at city hall are trying to use the master's tools, so to speak. They want the same power to stand athwart development that Whiter, higher-resourced neighborhoods have used for decades (Dillon & Luna 2020, Park Mesa Heights Comm. Counc. 2020, Sulaiman 2020). The specter of gentrification and displacement—pressures that have intensified in racially integrated urban neighborhoods in recent decades—has communities of color on heightened alert against development, and seeking greater control over zoning and land use. To strip communities of local control now, as development pressure rises in these neighborhoods, could further racial and spatial inequality. But this debate does not always reflect existing evidence. Low-income communities have historically received not enough development, rather than too much. Gentrification is not an inevitable outcome when development interests come to a neighborhood. But we need more evidence on how zoning and land use can help protect neighborhoods from these concerns.

The complexity of these forces and questions necessitates much more research, which is not often easy. Sociologists are just one group of scholars hampered by limited data on zoning and land use, which makes complicated urban housing processes very challenging to study. There are no annual censuses of local planning departments and their regulations. Instead, scholars rely on ad hoc surveys of planning staff (Gyourko et al. 2008, Kok et al. 2014, Pendall et al. 2018, Terner Cent. Hous. Innov. 2019). It is often unclear how reliable these surveys are, or how comparable they are across jurisdictions (Monkkonen et

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al. 2020, Murray & Schuetz 2019). Further, without repeated surveys, it is hard to observe how changes in zoning and land use affect housing affordability and segregation. This is particularly important as the regulatory climate is showing signs of change. Oregon, California, and the city of Minneapolis, Minnesota, have all made it significantly easier to replace single-family homes with multiple dwellings on one lot. As more jurisdictions chip away at low-density zoning in their communities, we require more data and more scholars to study effects on affordability, segregation, and inequality.

With more attention, better data, and stronger methods, we can address several pressing questions. Zoning and land use do not have to further social stratification, but we need more research on whether and how zoning and land use do this, and how these practices can be reformed to promote more equitable outcomes. Furthermore, the existing sociology of housing is very much incomplete without much more work on all of the forces that shape housing outcomes, zoning and land use arguably the most profound among them. Studies that look at the relationships between land use regulations and segregation are not the only necessary contributions from sociology. Ethnographic fieldwork on social exclusion is a clear way that sociology can contribute to the study of zoning and land use, and there are relevant examples on related topics (Kurwa 2015). We also need to know more about power dynamics and outcomes in local land use decisions, and there is a relevant literature on environmental justice to draw on (Jerolmack & Walker 2018, Molotch 1970). These questions connect to other matters that may be of interest to political sociologists, specifically the extent to which the US land use system reflects or contradicts the individualistic American ethos, given its restraints on property rights (Hirt 2015). There is a robust planning literature on community development and participatory planning processes where sociologists have just begun to contribute (Levine 2021). Sociology can also better link zoning and land use to higher-order concerns about inequality. Reardon & Bischoff (2011) have shown how rising segregation by income in the United States is in part driven by widening income inequality. It may also be the case that zoning and land use practices have more negative outcomes on low-income households and racial minorities when inequality is more severe. Being excluded from particularly resource-rich areas may matter more than it used to, as higher-income households have become more adept at resource hoarding. With inequality and urban rents both rising to previously unfathomable levels, it is urgent that sociologists do more to examine the connections between zoning, land use, and social stratification.

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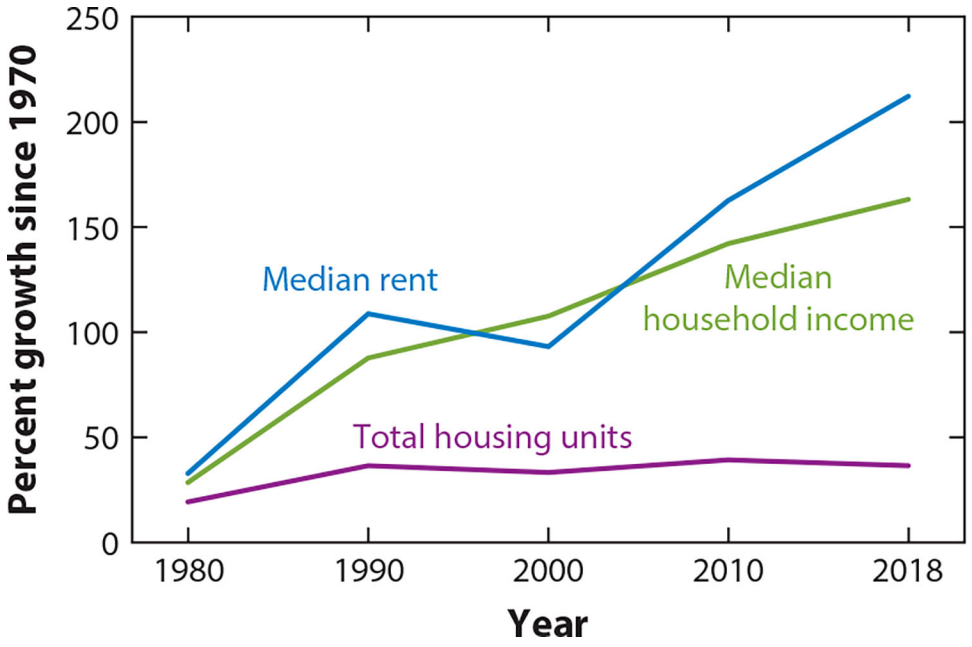


Figure 1.
Growth in housing production, rents, and income in Venice, CA, since 1970. This figure was produced from data provided by M. Manville.