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Sam Bass Warner: Modeling the Streetcar Suburbs, 1962
By John Corbett

Background During the early 1960s, before the environmental movement arose to criticize the destruction of open land overrun by the ravenous appetites of ever-sprawling American suburbs, increasing numbers of scholars were turning their concerns to the very aspirations of the suburban movement—the wholesale abandonment of the urban landscape and its attendant problems. At the forefront was Sam Bass Warner, Jr., whose 1962 book *Streetcar Suburbs*, sought to highlight the problems of contemporary urban areas by looking at the very genesis of the suburban movement. Although his mission was to underline how the lack of coherent planning ultimately produced the problems of modern suburbia, his work drew interest for its detailed analysis of how and why Boston expanded during that time and how its various socioeconomic classes were spatially segregated in the process. Decades later, *Streetcar Suburbs* is still required reading in many urban studies, history, and geography classes across the country.

Innovation Popular culture since the 1950s has informed us that the cul-de-sacs of ranch-style houses lining the streets of Levittown in 1948 represented the beginning of suburban America. While it is true that postwar suburbanization was unprecedented in terms of scale and in its reliance on an individual form of transportation—the automobile—it was by no means the first major suburban movement. Sam Bass Warner's 1962 book, *Streetcar Suburbs*, looks back at the explosive suburban growth around Boston between 1870 and 1900 and concludes that it, too, was made possible by an advance in transportation technology—the streetcar. Significantly, Warner also argued that nineteenth-century suburbanization, just like that in the twentieth century, was spurred on by socioeconomic considerations that left a legacy of class segregation.

Certainly the streetcar was unable by itself to produce a revolution in American society. The middle class had lived side-by-side with merchants and the lower-class in downtown Boston for centuries. According to Warner, the middle

class had two major motives for fleeing the city by the 1850s. The first was the growing immigrant population in Boston, especially of Irish Catholics fleeing the great potato famine of the 1840s. The second was that these immigrants tended to work in heavy industry that was increasingly locating in central Boston due to advances in steam engine technology. At the same time, there was a burgeoning movement that elevated nature, led by the urban parks of Frederick Law Olmsted. The aspirations of the middle class increasingly drifted away from the city and toward the ideal of the rural estate in the tradition of the landed wealthy.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, there would have been no way for the middle class to act upon such desires. Modes of transportation were unchanged since time immemorial. People could only travel as far as they could walk. Business transactions and social contacts were still conducted entirely face-to-face. As a result, businesses and residential areas clustered together in the central city.

The introduction of the first horsecar lines in 1852 represented the first major change in public transportation in Boston's history. Although businesses were still tied together because of the primitive state of communication, the middle class now had the limited ability to move to homes beyond the traditional city limits—two miles away from City Hall—and live out their "rural ideal" while still commuting to work every day. After a brief slowdown following the Depression of 1873, the pace of expansion picked up, and by 1900, the outer band of upper middle class settlement stretched some ten miles from City Hall. By the turn of the century, Boston was not only markedly larger in extent; it had become relatively segregated according to socioeconomic class.

In the chapter entitled, "A Selective Melting Pot," Warner explained how the development of the street railway was associated with class building patterns and spatial segregation. "To understand the relationship between transportation and building and the segregation which resulted," Warner noted, "it is useful to consider the suburban building process as if income and transportation were the two factors which affected the location of houses." Warner conceded that there were many exceptions to these factors, but that they did not change his overall settlement theory.

Warner first laid out the various income groups in the Boston area. At the top of the economic totem pole were the upper middle and upper classes, which totaled about five percent of the population. People in this category tended to have multiple options for transportation and housing, and were marginally affected by the changes in streetcar service. Often they had the benefit of two or more homes and a choice of railroad, streetcar, or horse-and-buggy service. They often took advantage of their ability to move farther out into the

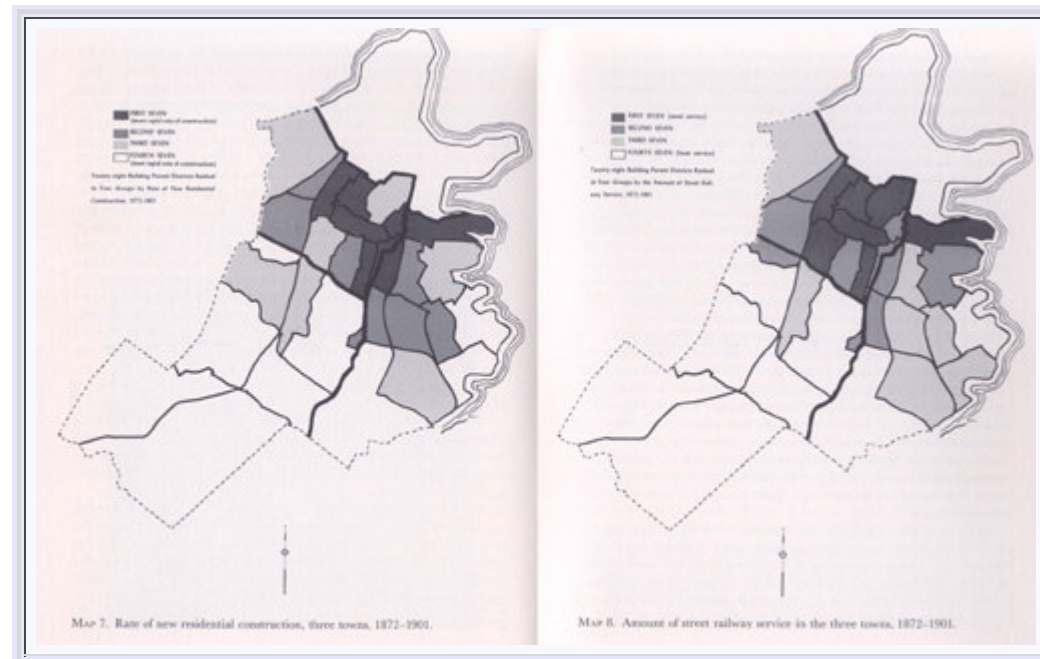
countryside than any other social group, and set the standard for middle class aspirations. Following them was the central middle class, which made up some fifteen percent of the total population. They were successful businessmen or professionals with stable jobs. This stability meant that linear streetcar service to downtown Boston was adequate to get them to their destination each day, which varied little over their working lives. The next group down was the lower middle class, some twenty percent of the city's population. Their careers were not as stable, and hence often required the flexibility of crosstown streetcar service. Below them were the lower classes, who were tied to the central city because income restraints kept them out of the suburban market altogether.

The extension of streetcar service was the key to the spatial arrangement of these groups. The outermost band of central middle class settlement ended at the limit of linear streetcar service, which had grown from three-and-a-half to six miles from City Hall between 1873 and 1900. The lower middle class was constrained by the limit of crosstown streetcar services, which reached three-and-a-half miles from City Hall by 1900. Then there was the traditional two-mile ring that limited traditional pedestrian commuting. Taking these radii and tracing a circle around the center of Boston, Warner was able to trace out rough concentric circles of socioeconomic settlement in the Boston suburbs, not unlike von Thünen's model of agricultural patterns.

The concentric circles not only showed where the various classes of Boston suburbanites resided; it also helped explain what kind of housing was available to each class. The outermost ring—the upper classes—not only were the furthest from Boston, but also had the most land with the smallest population. Warner computed that by 1900 "the potential area open to this group was now thirty-two times [the size of] the old city." Closer in was the central middle class ring, which in 1900 extended from three-and-a-half to six miles out from the city. This ring had at least twenty times the space as the old city. Land was not as plentiful as for the upper class, but it was enough to enable the central middle class to build detached homes at a reasonable price. Next in was the lower middle class, extending from two to three-and-a-half miles from the city. Simple geometry indicates that for this much more populous group, the land available to them was considerably less than for the outer classes—only six times the area of the old city. Hence, there was strong residential demand for a small amount of real estate, which itself was competing with industrial interests for the same land. As a result, housing was often in the form of small houses or multiple dwellings. Closest of all was the old city itself, home to high-density, dilapidated apartment blocks that housed the recent waves of immigrants.

By 1900, Boston, like many other American cities, was radically changed by the sentiments of the Industrial Revolution and the capabilities of the streetcar, both in size and in character. Warner was quick to point out that this development

had been largely uniform in character even though home builders were largely individuals working without the benefit of large amounts of capital or modern regulations. Perhaps because of this, the suburbs were designed not to enhance the city, but to enable residents to escape it for a fleeting taste of the county. In 1962, as waves of houses advanced further into the fields around American cities, Warner's analysis of the causes and effects of suburbia were as relevant as ever. Decades later, we are still dealing with the forces of development that Warner first unlocked, and as far as ever from finding a solution.



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