

American Cities vs. European Cities: What the Difference?

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Transcript: <https://dontveter.com/ec/cities1.pdf>

The United States and Europe both have large urban populations and deep cultural ties but their respective cities have some distinct differences.

For starters, there is a significant age gap between European and American cities.

When Europeans first arrived in the Americas, in the late 15th and early 16th centuries there were as many as 10 million natives living in what is today the United States.

But the natives were not concentrated in large urban settlements like the civilizations in what is today Mexico and Central and South America.

If there had been you can only speculate on what would have happened to them.

There are some exceptions though, the oldest continuous settlements in the United States belong to natives and are located in the Southwest United States.

These settlements were founded around 1100 AD but they generally have never hosted more than a few thousand people.

The largest known native settlement in the United States hosted as many as eighteen thousand natives.

This city, called Cahokia, was located in what is today the state of Illinois and just minutes from the modern day city of Saint Louis.

But Cahokia was abandoned by the year 1350.

The 10 largest cities in the United States on average were settled around the early to mid 18th century while Europe's 10 largest cities are hundreds and sometimes thousands of years older.

Europe's 10 largest cities by population are on average larger than American cities when counting the residents within city limits.

Out of Europe's 10 largest cities by population, none have less than 2 million people, but in the United States six of its top 10 have less than 2 million people.

European cities also have a higher population density, out of Europe's 10 most populated cities only three have a density of less than ten thousand people per square mile, St. Petersburg, Russia, Kiev, Ukraine and Rome, Italy.

The city with the highest density is Paris with 53,000 people per square mile, nearly twice as many people as the United States densest city, New York with 28,000 people per square mile.

After New York City it drops off pretty quickly, the second most populated city in the U.S., Los Angeles, has 8500 people per square mile, Chicago, 12,000 people per square mile, Houston 3500 people per square mile and Phoenix, 3100 per square mile.

Differences in European and U.S. cities populations and densities are largely due to American

suburbs.

People are living outside of the city limits and in homes instead of multi-storied structures.

These suburbs initially came about because of the train.

They then exploded with the wider use of the car and cheap fuel that powered them.

Land outside of American cities was also cheap making homes affordable for the middle class.

Chicago is often credited with inventing the suburb.

After the fire of 1874, the city banned the construction of wood buildings so speculators built cheap wooden homes as fast as they could just outside of Chicago for the hundred thousand people that were just left homeless.

After World War II, the federal government started guaranteeing loans that required 20 percent or less for a down payment and loan lengths as long as 30 years.

Before this it was common to have to make a 50 percent down payment with loan lengths as short as 5 to 10 years.

These new loans increased the amount of people that could purchase a home, but these loans had more favorable terms for new construction compared to existing housing, since the government did not want to back a loan on a house that may have issues.

This meant it was easier to get a new home in the suburbs than a property close to the city center which was typically older.

However African Americans were often discriminated against when it came to these loans so few were able to move to the suburbs.

While mortgage discrimination has improved significantly, the discrimination that occurred from the 40s to the 60s contributed to generational poverty and it has had a lasting impact on the geography of American cities.

African Americans are still less likely to be living in the suburbs than whites though the demographics are slowly changing.

Today more African Americans actually live in the suburbs at 39 percent than within city limits at 36 percent.

The mass exodus in many of these cities often referred to as “white flight” led to severe urban decay.

Residential buildings were abandoned leading to local businesses shutting their doors due to less customers, which resulted in job losses which led to poverty and crime, which led to more people leaving.

This cycle continues in many cities today while others have seen an urban revival in the last couple of decades as many young professionals move back to the cities.

However, where wealthier people in the United States tend to live in the suburbs, in Europe wealthier individuals are more likely to live in the city center.

Take a look at this map of the London underground which shows the average income of the neighborhoods that use each stop.

The highest incomes are at the center of the city and the lowest incomes are at the farthest stops from the center.

Speaking of public transportation, Europe's public transportation systems are usually thought of as superior to the United States, with a few exceptions like New York City.

Because of the suburbs, U.S. cities are too spread out and buses and trains can't stop at every block to pick everyone up, if they did, it would run extremely slow.

When it comes to roads, both the United States and Europe have extensive major road networks but in the United States large roads often run right through its cities instead of up to it.

While this may make sense in trying to quickly travel from state to state, or city to city, it is often criticized for splitting neighborhoods and disrupting local communities.

Another thing that separates European and U.S. cities are the amount of skyscrapers. United States cities generally have more skyscrapers.

Out of 50 cities in the world with the most skyscrapers only two are in Europe, Moscow, Russia with 57 skyscrapers, and Frankfurt, Germany, tied for 50th with 17.

The United States has 11 cities in the top 50, with the most going to New York City with 287 skyscrapers.

When European cities do have skyscrapers they tend to have a section designated for them away from their historic city center, like la defense, a business district which is actually a few miles outside of Paris itself.

The skyscraper was first born in the United States in the late 19th century, the first in Chicago and later in New York City.

The United States took pride in their large structures seeing them as a symbol of their prosperity and power.

Europe, on the other hand, already had established historic buildings and public spaces that left little room for large new structures.

They were also resistant to what could be considered American.

After the destruction of European cities in the Second World War, Europe had the chance to build whatever they wanted.

They could redesign their cities around the car as American cities were starting to, and now had room to build skyscrapers, but Europe chose not to.

Europe had an overwhelming desire to build their cities back to the way they were before the war

and to preserve their unique cultures and way of life.

The city of Brussels also played a role in the rest of Europe protecting its urban landscape.

The city of Brussels had a laissez-faire approach to urban planning in the 1960s to the 1980s.

laissez-faire, (French: “allow to do”) policy of minimum governmental interference in the economic affairs of individuals and society. The origin of the term is uncertain, but [folklore](#) suggests that it is derived from the answer [Jean-Baptiste Colbert](#), comptroller general of [finance](#) under King [Louis XIV](#) of [France](#), received when he asked industrialists what the government could do to help business: “Leave us alone.”

Structures that were often generic, and didn't fit in with Brussels historic city landscape were put all over the city.

The rest of Europe took notice and became concerned a similar randomness of structures could be placed all over their respective cities.

Zoning laws that protected Europe's historic districts and structures were then passed across the continent.

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