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# Urban Adolescence

**A**fter the Second World War, nothing in America was ever the same. Not even our cities were spared. The war was a rite of passage, a loss of innocence. Our childhood dreams and fantasies were incinerated at Auschwitz and Hiroshima, and we entered the self-absorbed adolescence of the modern era.

The changes weren't immediate, of course, especially not in our cities. Nor were they obvious. The fruits of the war ripened for a good 15 years before they began to turn. By the 1960s, America was in deep trouble, and the young generation growing up at that time knew it.

The main engine of urban decline was the automobile. Cheap cars and cheap gas made it easy for people to move into the country. So did the Interstate Highway System, Ike's network for national defense. If there were to be a World War III—and who could say there wouldn't be, especially with the Cold War heating up—we'd have to swiftly shuttle supplies and soldiers to seaport cities or to strategic spots around the country if, God forbid, the next conflict should be on American soil.

A second major contributor to urban decline was cheap housing. In the late 1940s, VA loans for new housing for GIs returning from the war set off an unprecedented 2-million-units-a-year building boom. With income tax deductions for property taxes and mortgage payments, but not for lease payments, it was cheaper to buy than to rent.

Bill Levitt learned how to construct entire towns for the Navy cheap and fast during the war. Buying a thousand-acre potato field on Long Island, he started the first Levittown in 1947. While other contractors took 90 days to build a single house, Levitt could build 30 houses in a single day. Developers imitated his success, and within a decade, suburbs were sprouting like weeds across America. White Americans flocked to these suburban enclaves, leaving the cities without enough taxes to pay the upkeep.

Fifty years later, our cities seem to have finally bottomed out. Suburbs are still going up, of course, but America's cities are acquiring an aura of respectability again. As we look around us, we see signs of renewal everywhere. This issue of FORUM looks at some of the changes needed for a full recovery. The topic is huge, and we can't begin to do it justice. All we can hope for is to pique your interest.

All the articles in this issue of FORUM—including those on food supply and migration—raise a larger issue about societal responsibility, however. I mentioned earlier that the Second World War was our rite of passage into societal adolescence. That was over half a century ago, which seems long enough for even a society to remain adolescent. It's time to grow up. Until our society is mature and responsible enough to truly care for our neighbors in the global village, we'll never be able to undertake the real business of building a sustainable future.

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