

MYLES ZHANG: Urban history in the suburban age

People's homes, their havens from the world, reflect their values and history. As a pandemic ravages and globalization ebbs, the cities have lost their sheen, and suburbs once again seem attractive refuges. The Garden State, "a mirror on America" according to New Jersey historian John Cunningham, is the most industrialized, densely populated, and immensely suburbanized state. Sitting between New York City and Philadelphia, this decentralized landscape with 565 municipalities exemplifies the tensions that often arise between cities and their suburbs. By effectively defining America's politics, commerce, taxation, and economy, the emerging suburban power shapes the trajectory of city centers. Michigan is the most fitting institution to revisit the interconnected histories of the American pastoral ideal, downtown decline, and suburban growth.

At Columbia, Ken Jackson shared with me his long-held interest in Newark and New Jersey with his narrative of suburban growth. He entered the same fallen walls as I did to visit Newark's old Essex County Jail, built by John Haviland in 1837. Captivated by Jackson's passion for New York City, I learned about the conditions for a vibrant metropolis. Served by excellent public schools, New Yorkers from every continent fueled the energy for industry and commerce. The superb infrastructure provided unmatched mass transit, pure and abundant water, and well-kept parks. The city's downfall traced the painful deterioration from the world's leading industrial and financial powerhouse to a beleaguered place, condemned to "drop dead" by President Ford. The rise and eclipse of great cities during the suburban age defy simple explanations and easy solutions. From Jackson, I have learned to refute caricatures of historic events and players. For instance, confronting Robert Caro's biography of Robert Moses, Jackson attributed the city's rapid turnaround to solid infrastructure built under the visionary leadership of the vilified "Power Broker." Reading Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier*, I learned about demystifying the emerging force of the suburbs. As Jackson concluded, "Because of public policies favoring the suburb, only one possibility was economically feasible." Federal policies of housing, highways, taxation, and race played determining roles in the decentralization drive.

My historiography training in architectural history provided me with a pivotal lens to contextualize individual structures in a larger historical context and broader built environment. Medieval historian Stephen Murray taught me to use ancient construction records to uncover the economic and human history behind the arduous enterprise of cathedral building. My senior thesis on the Cathedral of Saint-Denis and studies of Amiens Cathedral for Columbia's Media Center for Art History used materials in various French archives. Cathedrals' complicated geometry and symbolism can be decoded and appreciated through close study of the building fabric. I contributed to Murray's project, *Mapping Gothic France*, with digital maps of the geographic spread of cathedrals. As Camilo José Vergara observes, "A people's past, including their accomplishments, aspirations and failures, are reflected less in the faces of those who live in these neighborhoods than in the material, built environment in which they move and modify over time." Europe's dense cities with medieval origins are as much a reflection of their culture and history as America's sprawling suburban frontier is a product of our own time. Drawings of Gothic cottages and country homes by American scholars such as Andrew Jackson Downing informed the pastoral ideal in this country's earliest suburbs.

In early 2019, based on a preservation studio by Columbia graduate students, I curated an exhibition on Newark's Essex County Jail. The genesis and evolution of this historic landmark vividly illustrated the city's urban experience over two centuries. These blocks of rusting cells recorded America's experience with perpetual and rhetorical wars on "moral decay" in the nineteenth century, on alcohol during Prohibition, and on drugs after the Civil Rights Movement. The continuous expansion of this complex mirrored the growing power of the American carceral state. Sponsored by Rutgers Express Newark and the Newark Preservation and Landmarks Committee, I created a digital archive of documents, news reports, drawings, and photographs about this jail.¹ A supplementary oral history was filmed with interviews of former correction officers and Newark's mayor, whose father, Amiri Baraka, was jailed here during the 1967 racial uprising.² Influenced by this project, New Jersey Institute of Technology is working with local governments and the State Historic Preservation Office convert the jail into a memory park.

At the University of Cambridge, I expanded my study of carceral institutions and wrote my MPhil thesis about Haviland's Eastern State Penitentiary. By incorporating nineteenth-century newspaper accounts, meeting records, design renderings, and visitor descriptions, my research uncovered relationships between prison operations and the evolving understanding of urbanism and citizenship in Philadelphia. The prison strategically regulated the participation in democracy and economic life for subsequent groups of Irish, Italians, African-Americans, and Hispanics. At each stage, the built environment was modified to reflect the evolution of religious and social values. The penitentiary's unique panoptic structure was developed from Jeremy Bentham's reformist utilitarianism, received by American Puritanism and Quakerism, and adopted as a powerful symbol of the surveillance state worldwide. Through its history, class, race, religion, and public health and labor policies dictated paradigm shifts in the penal state.³

Supervised by Professor Gergely Baics and Jackson, I developed a digital cartographic project tracking 400 years of New York City history. I consulted various GIS collections, including the Library of Congress, New York Public Library, American Geographical Society Digital Map Collection, and Stanford's Rumsey Collection. For public discussion and teaching, my survey has been adopted by urban history classes at dozens of universities, featured by the Library of Congress,⁴ recognized by Columbia as the best historical GIS visualization of 2018,⁵ and viewed by three million online visitors. The project illustrates that urban growth closely corresponded to technology and infrastructure development. Human mobility's sequential reliance on walking, carriages, horse trolleys, subways, and finally highways produced correspondingly different streetscapes and neighborhoods. Developments outside the five boroughs, such as suburban growth, interstate highways, and food markets, influenced the city within, in complex, dynamic, and nonlinear relationships. The GIS project provides a transformative framework for gathering, managing, and analyzing spatial-temporal data to challenge traditional urban history case studies within isolated geographic boundaries. For further research, the powerful digital methodology enables more effective examination and animation of twentieth-century population movements between New Jersey cities and suburbs.

¹ Exhibit website and database: <https://www.oldssexcountyjail.org/>

² Oral history project: <https://www.oldssexcountyjail.org/interviews/>

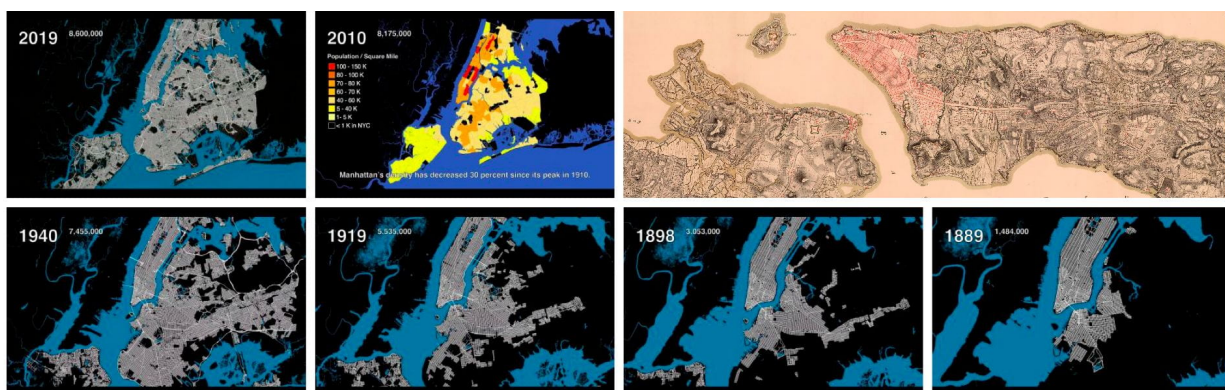
³ MPhil thesis: <https://bit.ly/cambridge-dissertation>

⁴ Interview: <https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2019/05/inquiring-minds-watching-new-york-city-grow-block-by-block/>

⁵ Award:

www.datascience.columbia.edu/news/2019/data-science-institute-at-columbia-university-data-art-contest-winners/

The massive agglomeration of New Jersey suburbs spans the entire portfolio of housing types, income levels, and racial divisions. Therefore, the history and structure of this built environment, in the wealthiest and densest area on the Northeast Corridor, is central to America history.



Film stills from *Here Grows New York*⁶

Michigan's PhD in Architecture provides an invaluable intellectual home. Several Michigan scholars are dedicated to inspiring themes in my academic interests. With his scholarship in urban history and planning, Robert Fishman situates the origins of suburbia in the utopian and pastoral ideal. Andrew Herscher studies cities, conflict urbanism, water rights, and the dispossession of Native Americans' land for development, all issues associated with my research projects. Craig Wilkins' work models compelling scholarship that engages oft-ignored people for understanding urban spaces and social justice. Collaborating with academics outside the architecture department will also enrich my interdisciplinary study with insights from history and philosophy. For instance, Heather Ann Thompson and Matthew Lassiter examine incarceration and political aspects of urban-suburban history. Joy Knoblauch's research on the history and psychologies of institutional architecture resonates with my study of Bentham's panopticon, surveillance theories, and Crime Prevention through Environmental Design.

As a student of urban-suburban history, I find few places better than Detroit to examine all relevant issues. When studying at Columbia, I travelled to Detroit to explore firsthand the urban experience documented in Thomas Sugrue's *Origins of the Urban Crisis* and Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier*. Newark and Detroit have shared their spectacular rise and fall during America's industrialization and de-centralization. Their traumatic experiences were rooted in drastic changes in the American economy and government policies, and ambivalent involvements with automobiles and shopping malls. From those ghost buildings, documented by Camilo José Vergara and myself, powerful memories refuse to vanish under urban renewal ruins or surface parking lots. The nexus of Michigan faculty, Detroit location, my urban experience, and my digital research skills will empower me to break new ground in urban-suburban history and built environment.

For more of my projects and publications, visit: <https://www.myleszhang.org/>

⁶ *Here Grows New York*: <https://www.myleszhang.org/here-grows-new-york-city/>