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# Encyclopedia of American Urban History

## Concentric Zone Model

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The concentric zone model is a highly influential representation of urban form and residential segregation. Formulated by the Chicago sociologist Ernest Burgess in a 1925 paper, the model is both a description and an [p. 183 ↓ ] explanation of the changing social geography of the modern American city. The concentric zone model was probably the first systematic overview of the internal structure of the modern industrial metropolis. Despite deep flaws, the model remains one of the most enduring academic expressions of the form of the American city.

Burgess made two major claims. First, he argued that the metropolitan area (which he called the city) was laid out in a series of zones that rippled out from the central core to the edge of the builtup environs. At the center was the “Loop,” or central business district (CBD), the home of the city's main financial, civic, retail, and entertainment functions. This was surrounded in succession by a “zone of transition,” occupied by an assortment of immigrants, migratory workers, and bohemians as well as warehouses and light manufacture; a “zone of workingmen's homes,” where secondgeneration immigrants and bluecollar workers lived in close proximity to work; a “residential zone,” where the middle class resided in wellto-do apartments and residential districts; and a “commuters' zone,” the district of suburban areas and satellite cities outside the city proper.

Second, Burgess claimed that these social and geographical zones could be explained through the theory of social ecology. Deploying ideas taken from plant and human biology, he argued that the internal structure of the modern city formed out of the residential shifting and sorting of people by ethnicity, race, and occupation. Rooted in a particular version of social Darwinism, Burgess argued that urbanecological change resulted from competitive succession, a process involving the expansion of one zone by the invasion of the occupants of the next zone. These ecological patterns were reinforced by the metabolic processes of social organization and disorganization, the antagonistic yet complementary processes of concentration and decentralization, and the social division of labor. Together, these processes formed a dynamic model of shifting and sorting by natural area and by zone and established the basis for differentiated economic and cultural groupings by space. They established the basis for residential segregation, the defining geographic feature of the modern city.

Burgess's views on the social ecology of the city were framed at the University of Chicago and in Chicago itself. Burgess learned his trade and developed his ideas in what was America's leading sociology department between 1915 and 1940. He was plugged into an exciting and vibrant environment at the university. The department was the home of several leading sociologists, such as Robert Park, who collaborated with Burgess to develop new theories and research questions. Department faculty and graduate students worked collaboratively, forming strong ties with the university's other social scientists such as George Herbert Mead and with Chicago social reformers and politicians such as Jane Addams. The result was that Burgess was able to blend theory, empirical research, and a concern with pressing social issues to create a particular style of sociological inquiry and a distinctive research agenda.

At the same time, Chicago itself was a laboratory where Burgess formulated and tested his ideas about urban society. A rapidly expanding urban place, Chicago grew from a small town on the eve of the Civil War to the second largest city in the United States by 1890. With a population of more than three million by 1930, the city contained a diverse population, a gigantic and dynamic industrial economy, and a tremendously segregated and unequal society. It was in this milieu that Burgess, as both an academic and a social reformer, sought to map and change the city.

Paradoxically, the zonal model's power lay in the very aspects that made it problematic as a model of sociographical patterning and as a theoretical construct. In the first place, it has endured as a model of urban reality despite the fact that it was empirically selective. Missing from the Chicago case, for example, were affluent downtown districts (the Gold Coast), factory districts that cut through zones (along the two branches of the Chicago River) and developed as nodes on the urban fringe (South Chicago, Pullman, Cicero, and Gary), and the socially mixed country towns (Blue Island) and satellite cities (Joliet, Aurora, and Elgin). Despite these empirical weaknesses, the model captured a sufficient number of significant sociogeographical elements—the CBD, ghetto, Little Sicily, and middle-class bungalow section, to name just a few—to convince many that it was a realistic mapping of the modern metropolis. The very divisions that were everyday for people were there on the map. Even though the model was criticized from the beginning, successive generations of scholars reread the text and the maps and found the model relevant for their understanding of the social groupings within the

metropolis. Regardless of the actual empirical precision of the model, its simplicity rang true for succeeding bodies of social scientists. It made sense.

Second, the concentric zone model made a powerful argument about the relationship of urban space to [p. 184 ↓ ] social class, social mobility, and assimilation. Burgess linked social characteristics (class, race, and ethnicity) to geographical elements (zones and natural areas) along a social gradient leading out from the CBD. The composition of the metropolis changed as one moved out from the Loop. The lower classes, unassimilated immigrants, artists, and the young and the restless, lived in the slums, badlands, submerged regions, immigrant colonies, and underworlds of the zone of transition. The respectable, settled, and secondgeneration immigrant lived in the adjacent zone. As Burgess wrote in 1925, this zone of workingmen's homes was the first spatial step up the social ladder for those who had escaped the deteriorating districts of the zone of transition and who wanted access to the standards of living promised by the American way of life. The next two zones, the residential and commuters', were the home of restricted neighborhoods and bungalows where the assimilated wellto-do American resided. Burgess was quite clear about the relationship among physical distance, social distance, and urban form. In the concentric model, assimilation, social class, and social mobility were geographically embodied in the very fabric of the city.

Third, despite its determinism, the social ecological vision of city form that Burgess constructed was rooted in a strong and dynamic body of ideas. Even though the theoretical underpinnings of human ecology have undergone significant change during the past 100 years, it has remained a vital element of the social sciences. In his elaboration of the concentric model, Burgess deployed midrange theories that have managed to maintain a place in the explanation of urban change. Despite their faults, concepts such as filtering (the passing down of housing to the working class by the middle class as they move farther out from the core) continue to play a part in the elaboration of neighborhood change and residential segregation. Burgess's ideas also were deeply rooted in the writings of an impressive body of scholars, such as Charles Horton Cooley, Max Weber, William Thomas, Émile Durkheim, and, most important, Georg Simmel, whose ideas about social change continue to hold sway over social scientists. Finally, the linking of the social division of labor and social disorganization, organization and differentiation with processes of succession, concentration, and

decentralization form the basis for a flawed yet dynamic theory that appeals to scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds.

Despite all of the model's problems, both as a map and as an explanatory framework for understanding urban change, it remains an important, influential, and foundational text for social scientists interested in the modern metropolis. Ideas about boundaries separating different economic and social groups and the internal dynamics of neighborhoods continue to play a central role in the understanding of the city, in both its historic and its contemporary forms. The socialgeographic gradient, with the poor and immigrants trapped in the central city and the wealthy living in the suburbs, continues to be a wellaccepted descriptor of the American city, especially before the supposed mass suburbanization of white, bluecollar workers after World War II. The simplistic and determinist ecological theory used by Burgess and his colleagues at the University of Chicago sociology department has been modified and used by a variety of scholars working on the historical, geographical, and sociological character of the modern metropolis.

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