

FICHE DE COURS : American Cities

Place dans les programmes du lycée : le programme de Terminale étant fixé par l'Inspection Académique, la question de l'adaptation de la programmation annuelle est réglée d'emblée. Le programme laisse une place éminente à l'histoire et la géographie des États-Unis. En géographie, la superpuissance américaine figure au nombre des chapitres retenus en DNL. Nous traitons donc ici d'un aspect de « The American Superpower – Geography of the United States ».

Place dans le plan du cours : ce chapitre doit porter sur les aspects géographiques de la puissance américaine en intégrant les conditions et manifestations territoriales, économiques et sociales de la puissance. Le chapitre pourra donc aborder successivement ces différents aspects de la question ; je propose ici une séance d'une ou deux heures plus spécifiquement consacrée à la ville américaine. Elle est structurée de la façon suivante :

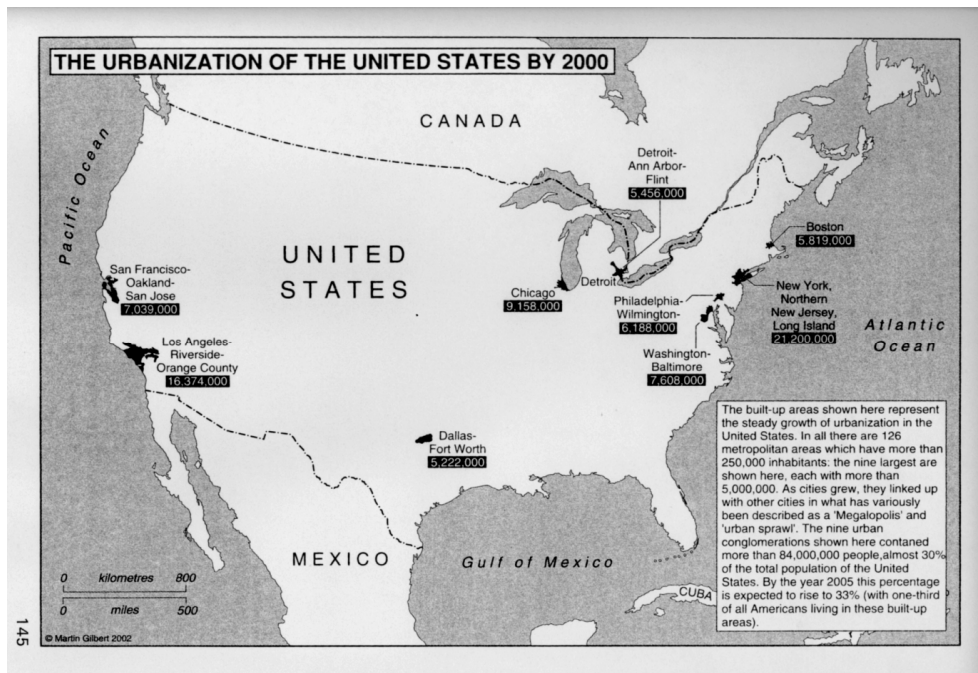
A – American Urban Areas and the Urban Network

B – The Urban Structure of American Cities

Objectifs de contenu et linguistique : en étudiant la ville américaine, le cours de DNL permet de mettre en place trois niveaux de lexique : le lexique classique de la géographie urbaine (“network”, “density”...); le lexique plus quotidien de la ville ; et un grand nombre de concepts propres à la géographie et la culture urbaines américaines (ex : “Burgess model”, “DINK”, “block”, “doughnut effect”...). Un travail interdisciplinaire en partenariat avec le professeur de langue, qui partirait de documents différents pour traiter plus particulièrement de la ville vécue, peut venir renforcer la dimension culturelle de cette séance.

A – American Urban Areas and the Urban Network

Doc. 1 – The Urbanization of the US in 2000



There are **130 metropolitan / urban areas of more than 250 000 inhabitants** (30 in GB, approximately 20 in France). **The largest nine amount to more than 80 millions**, that is between one quarter and one third of the total population, concentrated on less than 3% of the country's total acreage. This is an extremely **dense distribution**. The nine largest cities are :

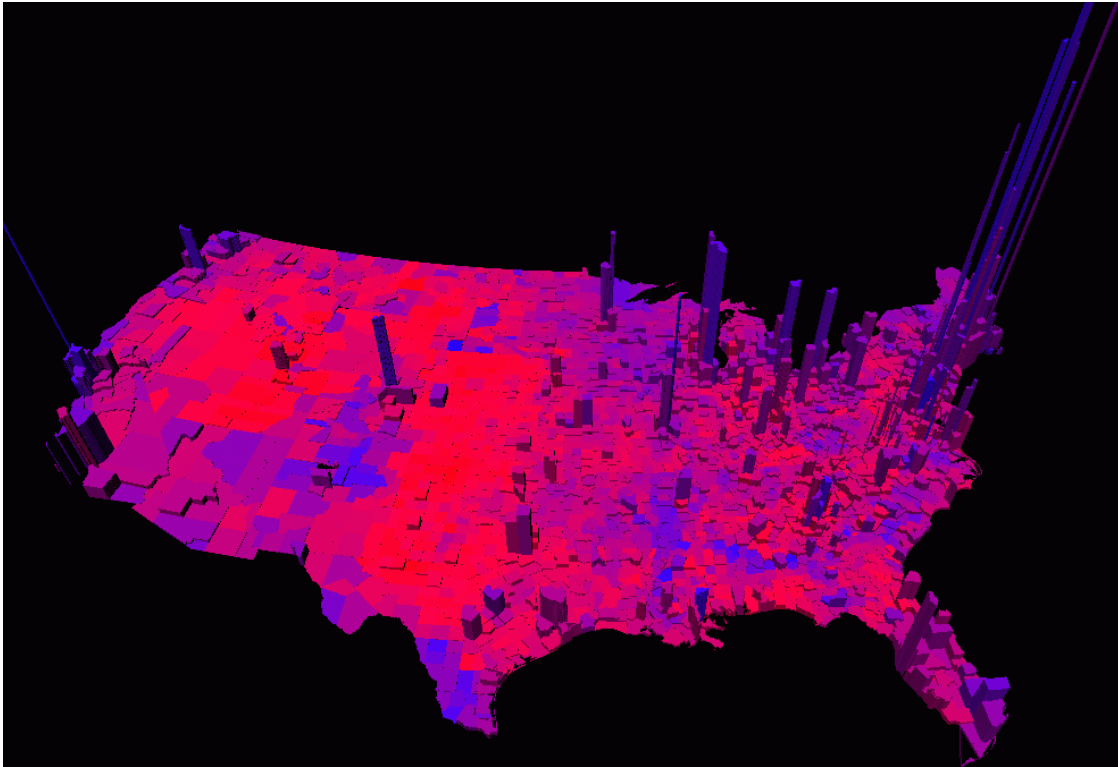
- New York : 7 millions for the 5 boroughs, **21 millions** for the metropolitan area
- Los Angeles : 17 millions
- Chicago : 9 millions
- Washington-Baltimore : 7 millions
- San Francisco : 7 millions
- Philadelphia : 6 millions
- Boston : 5 millions
- Detroit : 5 millions
- Dallas : 5 millions

These can be **broken into three major metropolitan areas** :

- The **Megalopolis**, or **Northeast Corridor**, sometimes described as "**Boswash**" : Boston, NY, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington. All united, they represent **some 40 million inhabitants**. The **urban sprawl** connects each city to the next : **the built-up area covers a 800 km long distance** with only very **few major disruptions**. You could virtually drive through this zone without leaving the built up area.
- **The Great Lakes area** is more **loosely tied** as the previous one, but still **gathers 20 millions**. If associated to the East Coast, **it merges into a vast urban network**.
- **The West Coast**, with two **prominent** cities.

In conclusion, it is worth noticing that **a huge proportion of the population is densely concentrated on a rather small portion of the territory**. Moreover, the **social behaviour** and **cultural habits** of highly urbanized states are not the same as those of the population in less urbanized states. Political votes is a good example :

Doc. 2 – 3D map of 2004 presidential election

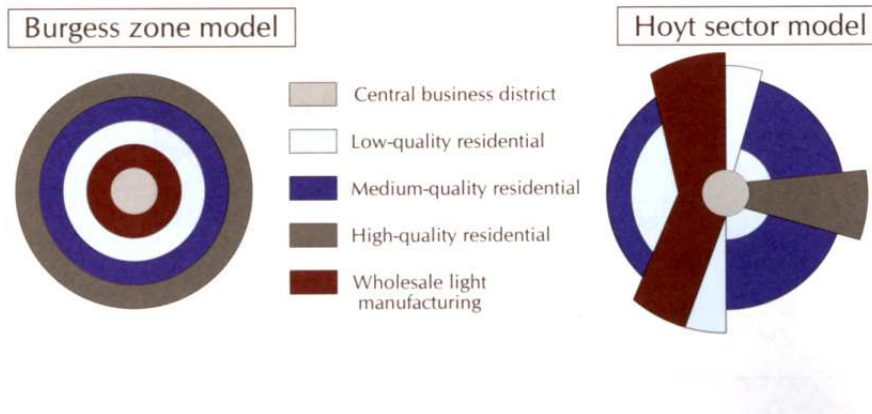


On this map, each county is represented by a vertical bar **as percentage** of its population. The **diagram makes it clear that** the urbanization is a major factor of the **uneven population distribution**. Moreover, the colours, **ranging from** vivid red **to** deep blue (red is for Republican vote, blue for Democrat) **emphasize the fact** that major metropolitan areas voted for John Kerry, **whereas** the Republican vote **held a majority** in less urbanized states. These colours also give the sense that the states who voted for John Kerry were **overwhelmed** both in number and in terms of acreage, but not in population. In conclusion, the urbanization map of the United States **gives a good hint of the cultural, social and political gaps** that exist within this vast country.

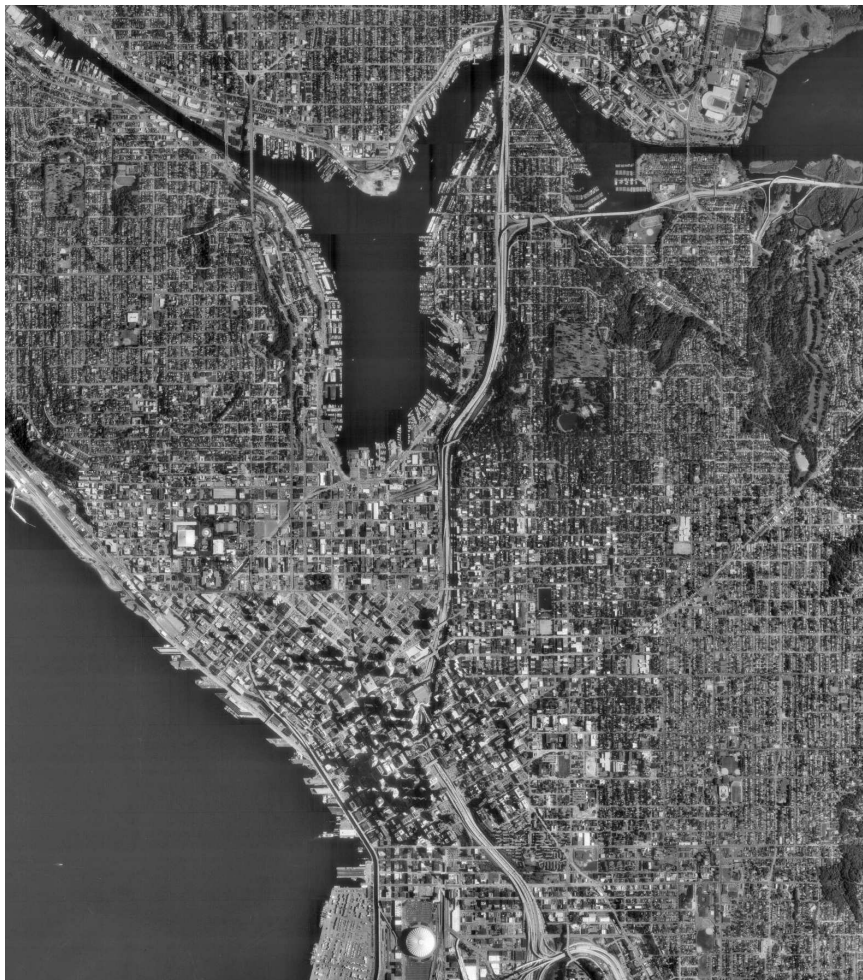
B – The Urban Structure of American Cities

The **layout** of American cities usually follows a **zoning pattern** or **zoning ordinances**, of usually two kinds : the **concentric model** (the **Burgess model**) or the **sector model** (the **Hoyt model**). Over this spatial organization is **superimposed** a **gridiron of orthogonal streets and avenues** which shape the basic unit of distance in American cities : the **blocks** (in mid-town Manhattan, New York, the blocks are 120 meters long and 60 meters wide).

Doc. – Urban models



Doc. – Satellite view of Seattle



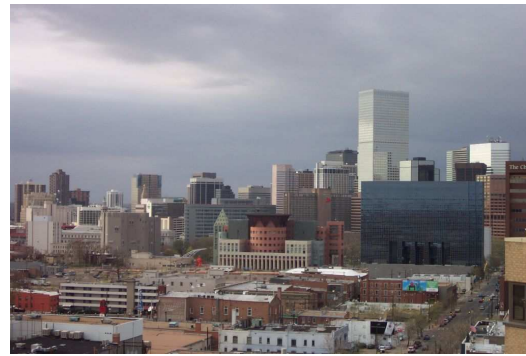
What are the main geographic features of each zone / sector ?

- The **CBD** : the letters stand for “**Central Business District**”, a **financial district**.

It is the geographic **core** of the city : entirely dedicated to **tertiary activity** (chiefly banking, finance, insurance) and offices **by functional zoning** which **concentrates and clusters similar activities** in the same area, it empties at the end of the working day, and is deserted during weekends.

Unlike residential neighbourhoods, CBDs are often **pedestrianized areas of vertical concentration**, with **skyscrapers**. In terms of **real estate**, geographers describe it as the **Peak Land Value Intersection (PLVI)**. Seen from a distance, the **urban landscape** is defined by the **skyline**, which constitutes a strong mark of a city’s identity.

Doc. – Photographs of Chicago, New York, Miami and Denver



These photos enable to tell clearly the CBDs from the subsequent areas, thanks to an **abrupt disruption in the skyline**.

The elevation of the building seems **random** and wild. The Sears Tower in Chicago (first picture) is to this day one of the highest buildings on earth : it culminates at 519 m.

• The **inner city** : transition zone, with wholesale, light manufacturing, **factories**, workshops, **warehouses**. Little by little, these zones declined, and became **derelict** areas, where only the poorest classes lived, in rundown **low-rental tenement** houses (originally working class housing), where maintenance hardly met **minimum standards**. As they turned into social **ghettoes**, these areas were called **inner cities**, the English equivalent to the derogatory aspect contained in the French term “banlieues”. Most often, these ghettoes are also **ethnic** like **Harlem** in New York, **South Side** in Chicago, or **Watts** and **South Central** in Los Angeles.

Since the end of the 1980s, in big cities, this area has been rebuilt and **gentrified** to turn the warehouses into smart, arty, and extremely expensive **lofts**. To the purpose of the **gentrification** of these areas, **real estate agents**, banks and **insurance companies** are often resented for resorting to “**red-lining**”, that is excluding coloured people from white residential areas on baseless grounds, thus creating an imaginary red-line between communities. The population then turned to **Yuppies** (Young Urban Professionals) or **DINKS** (Double Income, No Kids). Brooklyn, one of New York City’s five **boroughs**, is a good example of this phenomenon :

Doc. –Brooklyn : former factories and tenements on the foreground. Manhattan in the background



Doc. –Brooklyn, abandoned tenement and recently rehabilitated houses



• Suburbia

Only beyond these first circles are there **middle-class residential areas** to be found. The model of these **housing estates** are the **Levittowns** of Long Island or Philadelphia : **William Levitt**, born in 1906, was one of the first to introduce **mass production in housing**. They are **single-family housings**, and constitute **dormitory villages**, where there is no other activity. The **housing developments** of the **urban fringe** obey a rule : **the further from the centre, the richer and the better**. For instance, the **outskirts of Chicago sprawl on a distance of 60 to 90 km from the centre**.

Doc. – Housing areas of Gaithersburg (Maryland), Sun City (Arizona), Florida, and Columbus (Ohio)



What to these photos tell about **the American way of life** ?

- **standardization**, but...
- ...**individualism**
- importance of cars, often two per **household**
- **consumption** as a central activity : note the place of the **mall** on picture number 2. The development of urban fringes, with out-of-town shopping in malls, empty the CBD and highstreets stores, leaving a **hollow area** : it's called the '**doughnut effect**'.
- absence of local specificities in architecture : **nowhere land**
- **commuting** to work : **congestion**, hence solutions such as **flexi-time** (adopted by some companies), charging zones, 'park-and-drive'...
- picture 4 shows real estate **encroaching on farmland** : it is the **urban-rural fringe**, where **remote peripheral** urbanization led to the phenomenon of **counter-urbanization**. Geographers call this neither rural nor clearly urban area **exurbia**.

To complete this course with some critical and personal visions of American life in Suburbia, I here rapidly advertise but strongly recommend the following works and documents as possible inspiration either for the DNL or the English course :

Doc. – Marc Räder, *Scanscapes* – Photos of a ghetto for the well-off, 1999



In his book, this photographer focuses the light on the phenomenon of **gated communities**, wealthy and **highly protected compounds** for the **well-off**. His photos emphasize the artificial aspect of these communities which houses look like toy models.

Doc. – Bill Owens’ photographic report, *Suburbia*, 1970



**Doc. – Melvina Reynolds, *Little Boxes*, 1967
(Opening sequence of tv series *Weeds*, 2005)**

Little boxes on the hillside, Little boxes made of tickytacky
Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes all the same
There’s a green one and a pink one and a blue one and a yellow one
And they’re all made out of ticky tacky and they all look just the same.

And the people in the houses all went to the university
Where they were put in boxes and they came out all the same,
And there’s doctors and there’s lawyers, and business executives
And they’re all made out of ticky tacky and they all look just the same.