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Cities Forged in Steel: Urbanization, Industry, and Planning in North American Metropolises

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Introduction

This book traces how North American cities were literally and figuratively forged in steel: in the rails that cinched hinterlands to harbors, in the bridges and aqueducts that spanned rivers and deserts, and in the skeletal frames that let business districts reach skyward. From 1700 to 2000, urban growth in the region was propelled by intertwined forces of industrialization, transportation networks, and municipal planning. Our vantage is comparative and city-focused, following five metropolitan protagonists—Toronto, New York, Mexico City, New Orleans, and Los Angeles—to reveal shared patterns of development as well as divergent policy responses to migration, public health, and inequality.

The story begins in the long eighteenth century, when port towns stitched themselves into imperial trade routes and Indigenous networks, setting durable spatial logics of waterfront work and marketplace exchange. New Orleans's crescent on the Mississippi became a hinge between plantation economies and global commerce; Mexico City's status as imperial capital organized taxation, water management, and ceremonial space; and the modest outposts of Fort York and the Pueblo de Los Ángeles foreshadowed later struggles over land, water, and authority. These early configurations mattered. They furnished street grids, property regimes, and governance habits that later planners would inherit, contest, and sometimes entrench.

Industrialization amplified these foundations. Canals, then railways, concentrated investment and people, tightening intercity hierarchies while multiplying neighborhood inequalities. Tenements burgeoned near docks and depots; factories clustered along rights-of-way; and municipal institutions professionalized to manage waste, epidemics, and fire. Public health crises—cholera in nineteenth-century ports, smog and lead in twentieth-century metropolises—spurred new forms of expertise and regulation. Planning emerged unevenly: as park commissions and boulevard schemes in one city, as sanitary engineering and zoning ordinances in another. In every case, infrastructure served as both tool and terrain of politics, distributing risks and rewards across lines of class, race, and citizenship.

Our five case studies illuminate these dynamics from distinct vantage points. New York exemplifies how steel-frame architecture, subways, and a deep harbor underwrote a transition from mercantile entrepôt to global financial center. Toronto charts a path from colonial outpost to diversified metropolis, where annexation, transit-building, and greenbelt debates shaped a region-spanning urban form. Mexico City—continental capital and megacity—exposes the tensions of centralization, informality, and environmental vulnerability in a high-altitude basin remade by tramways, highways, and housing programs. New Orleans reveals the entwined

histories of slavery, flood control, and port modernization, while Los Angeles demonstrates the power of water transfers, boosterism, and freeway construction to manufacture metropolitan space. Across these sites, comparable pressures produced different choices with lasting consequences.

Methodologically, the book blends urban history with historical geography and planning studies. It draws on maps and censuses, engineering reports and municipal budgets, health records and court cases, as well as community archives and oral histories where available. Rather than seek a single causal key, the chapters stage a dialogue between infrastructure and governance, between economic restructuring and everyday life. The argument is simple but far-reaching: transportation technologies and planning regimes were not neutral backdrops for growth; they were the very means by which cities organized opportunity and exposure, mobility and immobility.

Chronologically, the narrative proceeds from the era of ports and canals through the age of steel rails, electrified streetcars, and skyscrapers, and on to highways, suburbanization, and deindustrialization. Each period widened the geographic scale at which urban decisions were made—from ward politics to citywide commissions, from municipal departments to regional authorities—and each raised new questions about democratic accountability. By 2000, the five metropolises had become nodal points in continental and global networks, even as neighborhoods within them wrestled with the legacies of redlining, displacement, informal settlement, and environmental risk.

Cities Forged in Steel is, ultimately, a study of power in material form. It asks how pipes, tracks, frames, and codes distribute life chances; how migrants and residents make claims upon them; and how planners—sometimes visionary, sometimes complicit—mediate between public health, economic growth, and social justice. Attending to both common patterns and local particularities, the chapters that follow offer a comparative cartography of North American urbanization from port towns to megacities, 1700–2000.

CHAPTER ONE: Port Towns and Power: Urban Origins in the Long Eighteenth Century, 1700-1800

The eighteenth century in North America was a crucible of urban formation, a period when scattered settlements began to coalesce into recognizable towns, powered largely by their connections to distant empires and their proximity to navigable waterways. Before the roar of factories and the crisscrossing of rail lines, the rhythm of urban life beat to the cadence of arriving ships and the bustling exchanges of the marketplace. These early port towns, far from being mere outposts, were crucial nodes in burgeoning global networks, often serving as administrative centers, military strongholds, and cultural conduits for their respective colonial powers. Their physical layouts, governance structures, and economic arteries laid down foundational patterns that would shape future metropolitan growth for centuries to come.

For the burgeoning British, Spanish, and French empires, control of strategic harbors and riverine access points was paramount. These locations facilitated the extraction of raw materials—furs, timber, agricultural produce, and minerals—and the efficient distribution of manufactured goods from the metropole. The geography of North America, with its vast river systems and extensive coastlines, naturally favored the rise of port-centric urbanism. Indigenous trade networks, long established and sophisticated, often served as precursors or integrated pathways into these new colonial commercial arteries, though often with devastating consequences for Indigenous populations. The establishment of formal towns, complete with streets, public squares, and fortifications, represented a tangible assertion of imperial sovereignty and a critical component in the grand strategy of colonial expansion.

The very act of founding a city in this era was often a declaration of intent, a physical manifestation of imperial ambition. Whether planned on a strict grid or evolving more organically, these early urban forms were profoundly influenced by military considerations, administrative necessity, and mercantile logic. The waterfront was invariably the heart of these settlements, a dynamic zone of docks, warehouses, taverns, and customs houses where goods, ideas, and people flowed in a constant stream. Beyond the immediate docks, the layout of streets and the allocation of land reflected the social hierarchies and economic priorities of the colonial powers. Governor's mansions, churches, and marketplaces often occupied prominent central positions, reinforcing civic order and imperial authority.

Consider New York, though at this point still known as New Amsterdam and then New York, a modest but strategically significant port on the southern tip of Manhattan Island. Its deep harbor and access to the Hudson River positioned it as a vital link in

the Atlantic trade. By the early 1700s, New York was a bustling hub for agricultural produce from the hinterland, furs from the interior, and a diverse array of imported goods from Europe and the Caribbean. The city's growth was inextricably tied to its mercantile functions, with merchants, shipbuilders, and artisans forming the backbone of its early economy. The Dutch legacy of careful land planning and robust commercial infrastructure continued to influence the city's development even after the English takeover, creating a dense, compact urban form that maximized waterfront access and facilitated rapid exchange.

Its early street plan, while not as rigidly gridded as some later colonial endeavors, prioritized connectivity to the docks. Warehouses lined the waterfront, and streets fanned out from the harbor, leading to marketplaces and public spaces. The Common, later to become City Hall Park, served as a vital public ground, a space for military drills, public gatherings, and even grazing animals. The population of New York during this period was remarkably diverse for its time, reflecting its status as a trading port that attracted people from various European nations and a significant enslaved African population whose labor was instrumental in building the city's infrastructure and economy. This early ethnic and linguistic tapestry, woven from different threads of commerce and servitude, would become a defining characteristic of New York's identity.

Further south, New Orleans presented a starkly different, yet equally compelling, example of early urban formation. Founded by the French in 1718, its location near the mouth of the Mississippi River was both a blessing and a curse. It offered unparalleled access to the vast interior of the continent, making it a crucial strategic point for controlling trade and projecting imperial power up the Mississippi Valley. However, its low-lying position made it vulnerable to flooding and disease, challenges that would plague the city throughout its history. The French colonial administration imposed a rigid grid plan on New Orleans, a testament to Enlightenment-era ideals of order and rationality. This famous "Vieux Carré" or French Quarter, with its rectilinear streets and central parade ground, was designed to be both defensible and efficient, a clear expression of top-down imperial planning.

The economic life of early New Orleans revolved around the fur trade, timber, and increasingly, agricultural products from the growing plantation economy of the lower Mississippi. The city quickly became a major port for the export of indigo, tobacco, and later, cotton, all heavily reliant on enslaved African labor. The constant threat of flooding necessitated the construction of levees, an early form of infrastructure that both protected the city and shaped its relationship with the river. The cultural landscape of New Orleans was a vibrant mix of French, Spanish (after its transfer to Spain in 1763), African, and Indigenous influences, creating a unique creole society unlike any other in North America. The city's multi-ethnic character, its strategic position, and its distinctive architectural heritage all stemmed from its origins as an imperial port town struggling to tame a formidable natural environment.

Meanwhile, in the highlands of central Mexico, Mexico City stood as a testament to an even older tradition of urban planning and imperial power. Built upon the ruins of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, the Spanish deliberately overlaid their own grid plan onto the existing Indigenous urban fabric. By the 18th century, Mexico City was the undisputed political, economic, and cultural capital of New Spain, a vast colonial empire stretching from present-day California to the Caribbean. Its sheer size and population dwarfed most North American settlements of the time. The city's governance was highly centralized, with the Viceroy, representing the Spanish Crown, holding immense authority.

The core of Mexico City was a monumental expression of Spanish imperial might: the Zócalo, or main square, flanked by the Metropolitan Cathedral and the National Palace, served as the ceremonial and administrative heart of the city. From this central plaza, a regular grid of streets extended outwards, reflecting a long-standing European tradition of rational urban design adapted to the colonial context. Water management was a constant and critical concern in the high-altitude basin, with a complex system of canals and aqueducts (many inherited and adapted from Aztec engineering) necessary to supply the city and control flooding. The city's wealth, derived from vast silver mines and a robust agricultural sector, flowed through its meticulously planned streets, supporting a vibrant intellectual and artistic life alongside stark social inequalities. The physical layout of Mexico City, with its grand public spaces and a clear distinction between elite residences and working-class barrios, underscored the hierarchical nature of colonial society.

Even in more peripheral regions, the seeds of future metropolises were being sown. Fort York, a nascent British military outpost established in 1793 on the shores of Lake Ontario, offered a glimpse into the future of Toronto. Its initial function was purely defensive, intended to secure the British presence in Upper Canada following the American Revolution. The small collection of military buildings and a nascent civilian settlement, later dubbed York, grew slowly around the protected harbor. The town site was chosen for its strategic location, offering a natural harbor and defensible bluffs. Early planning for York reflected a desire for orderly growth, with a grid plan laid out to accommodate future expansion, though initial development was modest and focused on immediate military and administrative needs.

The early settlers of York were largely Loyalists, refugees from the American Revolution, who brought with them a strong sense of British identity and a desire for stability and order. The town's economy was initially driven by its role as a military garrison and a minor administrative center, facilitating trade in furs and agricultural products across Lake Ontario. While lacking the immediate commercial dynamism of New York or New Orleans, or the imperial grandeur of Mexico City, York's strategic location and the careful, albeit slow, implementation of a planned urban form, set the stage for its eventual transformation into the bustling metropolis of Toronto. The

emphasis on lakefront access and organized expansion would remain a consistent theme in its urban development.

On the distant western frontier, the Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles del Río de Porciúncula, founded by Spanish colonists in 1781, was a far cry from a bustling port town. Situated inland from the Pacific coast, its early existence was predicated on agriculture and its role as a regional administrative center within Alta California. The Spanish colonial authorities, following established protocols, laid out a central plaza, around which public buildings and residential lots were allocated. This plaza, or *placita*, was the social and economic heart of the small settlement, a place for markets, religious ceremonies, and community gatherings.

The most critical factor for the Pueblo de Los Ángeles, and one that would define its future growth, was water. The availability of reliable water sources from the Los Angeles River was the primary determinant of its location and its agricultural viability. Early municipal efforts focused on constructing an *acequia* system—irrigation ditches—to divert river water to fields and homes. These initial hydrological interventions, designed to sustain a small agricultural community, foreshadowed the massive water infrastructure projects that would later enable Los Angeles to become a sprawling megacity. The challenges of water scarcity, even for this modest pueblo, were immediate and fundamental, shaping both its physical development and its governance.

Across these diverse settlements, a common thread was the assertion of imperial power through physical planning and the establishment of formal governance structures. Whether it was the rigid grid of New Orleans, the inherited and reconfigured layout of Mexico City, or the nascent plans for York and Los Ángeles, these early urban designs reflected European ideals of order, rationality, and control. The waterfront, whether on a vast ocean or a critical river, was the undisputed engine of economic activity, linking these nascent cities to global networks of trade and migration. The populations were often diverse, comprising European colonists, enslaved Africans, and Indigenous peoples, all contributing, often under coercive conditions, to the construction and maintenance of these urban centers.

The challenges faced by these early cities were also remarkably similar, despite their differing geographical contexts. Public health was a constant concern, with limited understanding of disease transmission and rudimentary sanitation systems. Fires were a perennial threat in densely packed wooden structures. The logistics of supplying growing populations with food, water, and fuel required sophisticated organizational efforts. Moreover, social order and the management of diverse and often unequal populations demanded robust, if sometimes harsh, systems of governance. These foundational experiences in the eighteenth century laid down the groundwork for future urban transformations, establishing enduring patterns of land use, infrastructure development, and civic administration that would continue to shape

North American metropolises long after the age of sail had passed. The port, in its various manifestations, was not merely a point of arrival and departure; it was the very forge where the earliest cities of North America were hammered into existence.

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