

PREVIEW: CITY CENTERS

You already have a U.S. history textbook and it probably is at least 300 pages long, so why should you add these pages to your history course? Your textbook covers all of American history, so it includes the important cities. But it probably doesn't have enough pages to spend some time dealing with two very important questions that are the key ideas in this unit:

1. Why are cities important places?
2. How do people bring about changes in one city that affect people far beyond that city's limits?

Because you live in a metropolitan area, you are in a center of culture, economics, government, politics, and religion. If you read the phone directory, you would be bored, but you also would find thousands of agencies, businesses, and institutions that affect the lives of people well beyond your own neighborhood. Making a catalog of all those organizations is one way to look at a city, but that isn't history. To study history, you need to consider the people who put together those organizations in the first place—or took them apart and rebuilt them.

If you read a phone directory for your area 10 years ago, you would find some organizations that are not listed today. And some of today's listings wouldn't be there. A city is a changing place, and it is a place that can introduce changes that will be part of history books in the future. While you could trace changes and make predictions just using the telephone book, you won't have a framework for looking at those changes. This unit is a chance to look at your city in a new way. It will give you a framework you can use to discover patterns in history and in your city today.

YOUR CITY AND YOUR IDEAS

We were going to write a pre-test for this unit, but this is not a usual kind of unit and while it deals with important issues and questions, there really is no one correct answer for any of the questions. So we have put together a list of five important ideas and asked questions to help you apply the idea to your own city. Each question deals with a different important idea that is part of this project. Write your answers to the questions now and then review them after you finish the unit.

1. Idea: The city is a center

Questions:

- A. In what way is your city a center for its area?
- B. What factors make your city so important?

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2. Idea: Economic development (a change in the structure of the economy) requires three factors—(1) persons who respond to changing conditions with a plan for change; (2) funding of the change; (3) support for the change that enables its developers to overcome resistance.

Questions:

A. What are the kinds of characteristics a person needs to keep on working to bring about a change in the economy?

B. What questions might a banker in your city ask a person who asks for a loan to pay for a new project? What rules might the city government set for using public funds for that project?

C. Give an example of an economic development project that someone is proposing in your city now. It could be a World's Fair or a new airport. Who might support this change and who might oppose it?

3. Idea: Progress is not automatic or continual; some cities have been very important at times and then have lost some importance.

Question:

After the Revolutionary War, Alexander Hamilton predicted that Jersey City would become “the metropolis of the world.” It hasn't done so yet. Why might a city be more important at one time than at another time?

4. Idea: Change is not progress for everyone; economic development destroys some things as it creates other.

Question:

One example of this “creative destruction” is the unemployment of buggy makers when people started to buy automobiles. Give two examples of creative destruction going on today.

5. Idea: Change is not automatic; the building of cities and the development of economies depends upon the choices and actions of people.

Question:

In 600 B.C., a Greek wrote about the important cities there that “Not houses finely roofed nor the stones of walls well built...nor dockyards make the city, but men able to use their opportunity.” [Alcaeus quoted by Jane Jacobs in *The Economy of Cities*.] What do you think are the keys to the development of a city?

6. Your Ideas: What other ideas are important to understanding a city and why?