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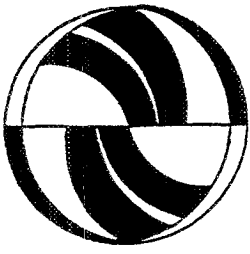
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The Joys of Spread-City

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The joys of spread-city

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Increasing ease of interaction and transaction across geographic space is reducing the constraints of distance and fostering social and economic integration across wider territories – globally and locally. Metropolitan areas are dispersing into their surrounding territories, creating the characteristic spread-city pattern. The worldwide incidence of ‘urban sprawl’ suggests that powerful forces are moulding it and that some highly valued outcomes are being generated as well. So long as groups and places are accessible to each other, and so long as metropolitan settlements satisfy valued *operating* criteria, the shape of a metropolitan settlement is of minor importance. Spread-cities are proving to be highly successful, and they seem to be the form of the future metropolis everywhere.

Some world-wide trends

Similarities among metropolitan areas may seem surprising in light of the widely varied cultures, politics, and economics that mark the world’s regions. The dominant technologies vary among them as well, along with their stages of economic development, levels and distributions of wealth, and internal compositions of their economies. How can it be true, then, that the maps and tables in so many books look so much alike?

I suspect the prominent cultural differences have been masking their increasing commonalities, leading us to see their idiosyncracies instead. But, today, when history is speeding up, nations everywhere seem to be racing to become more like each other. Visibly apparent ‘samenesses’ are accompanying inherited and long-standing differences.

Some universal forces seem to be at work around the world. Among the underlying influences shaping metropolitan societies are the overriding global traits of modernity – increasing specialization of labour and resulting interdependencies among persons and industries, monetization of economies; acceptance of modern technologies; rising wealth; and rising consumer purchasing power. In turn, modernization has meant expansion of the non-extractive industries and urban-

ization of the national populations. Resulting economic betterment, in turn, is making for greater capacity to consume – to consume houses, cars and the accoutrements of modern life – and to enjoy greater ranges of individual consumer choice. These, in turn, foster rising aspirations and ever-higher standards of living. Established and new middle classes everywhere are acquiring free-standing housing surrounded by adjacent open land, typically spacious enough to hold all sorts of modern appliances. Residence-serving services and new industrial plants are following them, reinforcing low-density expansion at the metropolis’s growing edge.

Declining roles of extractive industries are paralleled by increasing emphasis on information-rich products whose raw materials are knowledge and intelligence instead of ore, soil and oil. Transmission of data, information, money, and other non-physical commodities rely on telephones, computers, television and wireless radio channels that have become world-wide in scope. Physical commodities are transported evermore easily and rapidly, making for greater mobility of resources, both natural and human. Typically, current modes of transport are world-wide in their operations. They include ocean-going container ships and high-capacity jet aircraft, nowadays sharing tightly co-ordinated schedules with

ground-based trucks and railroads and permitting geographically extensive accessibility, mobility and just-in-time manufacturing. As equipment for communication and transportation is improved and installed world-wide, both households and business establishments are becoming increasingly footloose. Activities that once had but few locational options – that once had to locate near sources of raw materials and energy, or at transport junctions, or adjacent to resident labour force – can now locate almost anywhere and still have ready access to those resources. Besides, they can operate with comparable effectiveness, even if physically removed from their associates, suppliers and customers.

The outcome is increasing internationalization of firms and whole industries. Rapid diffusion of innovation and high mobility of capital, technology and managerial capabilities is making for rapid industrialization, even among societies that were pre-industrial only yesterday. In turn, increasing skills, incomes and capacities to consume mean evermore rapid modernization around the globe, typically led by firms conducting their business in many nations simultaneously.

Most of them have chosen to locate in the midst of the world's large metropolitan areas where business services, transport and labour are readily available. The magnetic attraction of jobs has induced population migration from rural areas and transformed regional subcentres into megacities. Accumulating business services, improved communication and transport and available personnel at those sites has, in turn, made these urban places increasingly attractive to new industries, foreign and domestic. The effect is a seemingly unending process of mutually reinforcing growth.

Internationalization of cultural traits and preferences follow, making for similarities of wants in newly industrializing and post-industrial countries alike. That has been so, despite initially wide cultural differences among the world's nations and regions. So, even though Bangkok residents may differ from Europeans and Americans in basic values, religious beliefs and behavioural patterns, we can predict directional changes in some of their consumption and living styles by looking to places like San Diego and Randstad which are further along the developmental path.

Despite some emerging gross similarities across

cultures (similarities, not homogeneities), we can also expect increasing cultural diversity over future time. As new ideas are generated and percolate through society, we should expect new literatures to emerge everywhere. New music, new belief systems, new religions, new sports, new organizational forms, even new philosophical systems and new modes of governance are the likely products of increasing education, interchange and exposure to the knowledge, customs and thoughtways of other societies. That is to say, despite increasing similarity, but abetted by increasing intercourse, we can expect increasing innovation and difference too.

Spatial attributes

Virtually all metropolitan areas world-wide are marked by peripheral expansion. San Diego's map reflects the diffused spatial pattern. Among the megalopolises in developing countries, Jakarta's and Bangkok's patterns look like San Diego's. In contrast, Randstad's may show fewest signs of scatteration, even though it too seems to be acquiring San Diego-like propensities. Despite internationalization of technologies, business enterprises, and lifestyles, it is apparent that some striking differences remain among them. How can we account for these differences?

Surely their relative stages of modernization are responsible for a lot of the diversity. Because high income levels and widespread auto and home ownership must contribute to the spread-city form, we can expect metropolitan areas in wealthy post-industrial economies to be widely scattered outside their metropolitan cores. Thus it is no surprise that San Diego, Los Angeles, Phoenix and others in the American West and South are spatially dispersed over wide areas. In contrast, we might expect a metropolis in a newly developing nation to be more compactly structured. Sao Paulo, Bangkok and Jakarta would seem to fit the compact model. And yet, their maps are already looking like San Diego's, while Randstad's dispersion has been slower to evolve.

Perhaps the sources of these disparities lie in their different cultures of governance. The Dutch are renowned for the rigour of their regulations over land use. Built-up towns literally stop at a town's legal boundary or at its plan-designated edge. Green lands are presumably inviolate. The

Netherlands' equivalent of zoning more closely resembles a constitutionally stable law than that of a flexible statute or regulation. Certainly, changes there are not readily for sale

In America, and probably in most rapidly developing countries where virtually everything is negotiable, there are active markets in modifications of land use regulations. At a price, one can get any rules revised or rescinded. Besides, because American government is so highly decentralized and because no central authority can co-ordinate decisions or controls over land use, the Americans rely heavily on the workings of land markets and political markets. Markets, in turn, reflect the revealed wants and demands of participating citizens

Governance in Bangkok somewhat resembles America's in these respects. If so, it is not surprising that the geographical edge of Bangkok is coming to resemble the edge of San Diego – and of virtually every other American metropolitan area as well. Developments in many other places reflect the workings of land markets rather than the precepts of formal plans. As such, they reflect consumer preferences, builder preferences, emplaced infrastructure for transport, water supply, waste disposal and communications, and, *inter alia*, the vicissitudes of who happens to be in political-governmental office at a given time. In truth, land use regulation in many cities scarcely warrants the label 'regulation'. They are so irregular, so flexible and so adaptable to political pressure, they are more like 'nominal guides' than regularizing controls.

The dispersed settlement surrounding so many of the global metropolises directly reflects land-market responses to continuing in-migration of population and industry. It also reflects political acquiescence to that migration. The accompanying spatial dispersion has attracted much negative criticism, owing to the higher costs associated with lower density – especially higher capital costs of infrastructure and higher operating costs of travel. But the benefits deriving from the dispersed (and seemingly messy) pattern of the San Diego model may equal, if not exceed, the benefits deriving from concentrated patterns, such as that of Randstad several decades ago – or of London or Paris today.

To be sure, San Diego is surrounded by a lot more

empty land than is available anywhere in the Netherlands. So San Diego, Los Angeles, Phoenix and the other highly dispersed metropolitan areas of the American West can afford to spread across the landscape, virtually uninhibited. In turn, that sprawled pattern is wholly compatible with most of the population's ability to pay – to pay for low-density housing, for multiple cars per household, and for the associated high costs of infrastructure and public services that attach to spatial dispersion. Given the public's ability and willingness to pay the costs of the spread-city, and given their apparent preference for these living and working patterns, there is no gainsaying the wisdom of building more cities from that mould.

It looks as though spread-city is the form for the modern city – the form that closely matches societal modernization, current levels of income and wealth; industrial mix; retailing and consuming patterns, modes of travel and communication, and preferred lifestyles during this time in history.

Although aficionados may find spread-city aesthetically unacceptable, although economists may judge it overly costly, although it may violate traditional canons of urban design, it is the form that seems to work best with cars, wealth, and wide consumer choice. Four associated problems are genuinely troublesome, nevertheless.

Four problems with sprawl

- 1 Not everyone can afford those costs. Large segments of every nation's urban population do not enjoy the high-paid jobs, high-quality housing, and high levels of accessibility associated with individual automobiles and the rest. Residents living in the favelas of this world may not be worse off *because* the middle classes are enjoying more spacious residences and ease of travel, but they are surely not better off. Where much of the metropolitan fringe holds shanties built by recent in-migrants, as in much of Latin America, the costs are largely borne by the lowest income residents. Having to spend inordinate amounts of time and money just getting to and from such jobs as they can find in the metropolitan centre, they are surely far worse off than people living near employment sites. Despite life's miseries

among poor migrants, continuing migration to the megacities suggests that life in the rural village must be harder still. Until such time as migrants acquire the requisite urban and industrial skills and until relocation of jobs or improved transportation reduces their isolation, prospects for their integration into the economic and social life of the metropolis will be limited.

2. No metropolitan area charges the full costs of infrastructure and services to the users of the facilities and services. So, others are paying for the benefits enjoyed by those users, and these cross-subsidies make for profligate, uneconomic, over-consumption by some. Where funding comes from low-income sources and benefits rebound to upper-income recipients, where environmental degradation is concentrated in districts already marked by severe poverty, the redistributive effects can scarcely be justified. There can be but limited tolerance for a metropolitan spatial structure whose costs fall unduly upon those least able to sustain them.
3. Expanding populations, increasing numbers of automobiles, and limited road capacity have led to traffic congestion and ever-rising costs of movement and loss of access, compounded by air and noise pollution. It is something of a paradox that the city's fundamental attraction has always been the promise of accessibility among interdependent persons and groups. And yet, by concentrating large numbers of persons and cars into limited space, access is reduced, if not erased. In some places, business and social life is locked up by traffic jams that extend for much of the day, owing to inefficient spatial distributions of activities and to inadequate transport capacity. Because accessibility is the *sine qua non* of the city, accessibility must be ranked as the dominant criterion against which alternative spatial patterns must be judged. The spatial form and density pattern that makes for the most access and hence the freest social and economic intercourse should be the structure most worth striving for.
4. In the absence of studied concern for the quality of the natural environment and associated ecological systems, urban developments are likely indiscriminately to spread onto lands that are best kept open and undisturbed. And yet land markets

are notoriously insensitive to environmental attributes that are judged valuable, but are not accountable in normal market transactions. Some sites having unique natural features, or providing habitat for endangered species, or having other special qualities, justify retention as undeveloped places. Yet these may be caught up in the normal processes of suburbanization and used as building sites instead. They may then be lost to future use as parks or other public-service areas unless explicitly removed from the normal commercial land markets.

These are serious matters, especially in developing nations where poverty is widespread and deep-seated and where the urban economies are most fragile. But, apart from these issues in redistributed social justice, spatial accessibility, and environmental quality, I see little cause for concern regarding the spread-city form.

Some benefits of spread-city

- If costs are commensurate with services received and ability to pay,
- if persons are freely accessible to opportunities for jobs and for free social intercourse,
- if producers are readily accessible to sources of raw materials and markets,
- if economic transaction and social interaction are not unduly constrained by distance,
- if sites that are valued for non-urban use can be reserved

then the spatial pattern of the urban settlement is, *per se*, almost irrelevant.

That is to say, it matters not whether mapped patterns are concentrated or dispersed – whether densities are high or low and whether activities occur in centres or at scattered sites – so long as the valued operating criteria are satisfied.

Further, to the degree it fosters a high standard-of-living, high efficiency of the urban economy, high levels of social interaction and satisfies the preferences of consumers and producers, as it seems to do in wealthy metropolitan areas, spread-city must be judged a desirable form.

The success of America's extensive suburbs

(especially in the new and modern cities of the South and West) is clear evidence of the spread-form's merits. The economic viability of this arrangement is exemplified by the industrial success of the Los Angeles metropolitan area – spread-city par excellence which became the largest manufacturing concentration in this highly industrialized country. It continues to attract millions of migrants from around the country and around the world, people seeking a better life, with most of them finding it there in that extensively spread-out metropolis.

Many of the world's large cities are also expanding in Los Angeles-type or San Diego-type or Bangkok-type or even Sao Paulo-type dispersed and low-density patterns. That trend suggests either that this arrangement has something powerful going for it, or that it is being compelled by some powerful, world-wide technological and institutional imperatives that most societies have so far been unable or unwilling to restrain. I suggest it is both.

Dissolution of geography

Modern transportation and communication technologies are rapidly dissolving geographical space, and we have probably seen only the early stages of that dissolution. As the effects of information exchange are realized, the costs of overcoming distance will collapse even further.

Highly specialized and affluent persons already live in non-place societies. Rather than relying primarily on face-to-face interaction, people already communicate largely through print on paper and through telephones connected to fibre optics, radios and satellites. Increasingly, they are communicating through Internet and e-mail – world-wide. Urban life is already, in large measure, lived in electronic channels that are essentially freed from geographical constraints. That trend toward unimpeded intercourse suggests that spatial location will be less important in the future metropolis than it is today – that the spatial pattern of the metropolitan development will be of lessening importance.

It is clear that no metropolis is any longer, in any sense, an independent entity. All of them are increasingly and intricately engaged with all other metropolises around the world. They are

constantly exchanging information, goods, ideas, money, customs and personnel.

In that sense, all metropolises are 'global'. There is no such thing any longer as a provincial metropolis. It is no longer fitting to consider a single metropolis as a unitary place – to treat a metropolis as a place-defined phenomenon. Indeed, its place-specific characteristics are anachronistic, hence of ever-lessening relevance. All metropolises are connected to all others in real-time. They are all economically interdependent. They are all interlinked parts of an integrated international urban system.

Despite their geographical separation, Bangkok's economy is a subset of the world economy in which San Diego, Sao Paulo, Tokyo, Randstad and the rest are also subsets. So Bangkok is effectively a part of (not merely a partner of) San Diego and Randstad and all the other metropolises. Similarly, inside the dispersed settlement pattern of any metropolitan area, the social, political and economic activities in any one district are integral with those of all other districts, making even the idea of a separate business district or a separate suburb anachronistic.

Spatial dispersion is occurring at all geographical scales, propelled by that long array of factors referred to: automobiles, telephones, Internet, international corporations, international finance, rising incomes and rising aspirations. Even in the Netherlands! Consider this excerpt from the Randstad report to the book (Simmonds, in press):

Randstad and Holland have a long tradition of far-reaching control of urban form with rather sharp boundaries around the urban settlements in the provincial plans and urban structure plans. Urban forms will gradually lose their traditional boundaries, and become blurred on the city region maps, to merge in the end into continuous form combinations of the future Randstad (Simmonds, in press).

We have all seen recent data indicating that the long-augured megacities of megamillions may turn out to be exaggerations, because migration to the largest metropolises is declining. If that is really so, does it imply lessened productivity of the national economies, given that the biggest metro-

polis has traditionally been the most productive and efficient centre within each country? Or, rather, does it imply increased productivity within the national economy? I suspect the latter, so long as outlying urban centres are highly accessible to each other and to the primary metropolis.

In retrospect, it should be no surprise that migration trends are shifting. Declining cost of overcoming geographical space means that functional proximity is no longer dependent on spatial propinquity. Persons and forms within a given urban settlement have long been adapting to the costs of density and congestion by moving to the outskirts of town. They are now also able to move away from the metropolis, even to towns considerably distant.

The counterpart of spread-city is dispersed-urban-region. Populations and functions, once constrained to the metropolis by high costs of interaction and transaction, are now able to prosper no matter where they happen to locate within the national landscape. If that is really true, we can expect increased productivity to follow the greater dispersion of urban activities across the landscapes of the Third World. Experience in the United States points the way. Following installation of transportation and communication systems, urbanization quickly spread from the eastern regions to places like Los Angeles and San Francisco and, more recently, to such places as the mountains of Colorado and Montana.

The United States Metropolitan Region occupies the entire continental space from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Urban activities are located at sites throughout the national space – and beyond – integrated into a coherently functioning national urban system, that is, in turn, integrated into the coherently functioning global urban system.

Rather than focusing on settlement patterns within limited metropolitan areas, perhaps we should be directing our sights to settlement patterns within nations, or global regions, or, more appropriately, the globe!

The course of future progress

The trends discussed represent progressive improvements over conditions in the recent past. So-called Third World nations are urbanizing rapidly – modernizing rapidly. That is, they are industrializing, then building high-level service economies accompanied by rising living standards. The standards are not yet high enough for all their citizens, but increasing proportions of them are enjoying enriched lives, with prospects for ever-wider diffusion of benefits to higher proportions in the future. (Witness the successes of the so-called Tigers of East Asia with their escalating GNP, narrowing distribution of income and wealth, and expanding middle classes.)

I suspect that spatial arrangements inside metropolitan settlements are far less determining of the course of progress than are organization of industry and patterns of governance. I am suggesting that what matters most is accessibility among partners to interaction and transaction and then the volume and distribution of benefits and costs – not spatial form.

I suggest, further, that trends toward spatial dispersion are symptoms of greater productivity, and wider distribution of wealth – that spatial dispersion is a sign of progress. Moreover, I suspect these spatial trends are unstoppable – that there is little, if anything, any society can do to deter them. If this is right, the spread-city is here to stay – in Bangkok, San Diego, Randstad and metropolitan areas world-wide.

In celebration, I propose we all exclaim a loud and joyous Hallelujah!

References

- Simmonds, R. and Hack, G. (eds.) *Global City Regions: Their Emerging Forms*. London, E & FN Spon (in press)