



Cities and powerful knowledge: An editorial essay on accepted wisdom and global urban theory [Part I]

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ABSTRACT

This editorial essay is the first of two designed to lay out a firm intellectual foundation for the material that will be published in future editions of *CRoC*. This first part is necessarily critical, pointing out that there is a stifling discourse of normative thinking that imposes a rigid framework of what is 'good' and what is 'evil' in our cities, to use Schorske's terms. Lacking in understanding of context and place, attempting to impose a rigid template of density and planning practice, this critical framework inhibits our ability to think coherently and creatively about the future—which is what Angel describes as a "planet of cities".

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Introduction

"The material basis of most of our experience: the city" Castells (1983), p. xvi

"Sometimes city roads are paved to hell" Glaeser (2011), p. 2

Cities are large, complicated constructions, distinct and thus ultimately different one from another, yet also recognizable across time and repetitive across space. The challenges of explaining the process of urban development and its role in the creation of complex societies have caused some of the best social theorists to contemplate the city. They have produced thoughtful, sometimes profound, assessments of what is 'good' in urban existence (e.g. Hall, 1998). As more and more people leave rural areas and seek opportunity elsewhere, we now increasingly conflate the conditions of urban life with the realities of a 21st century existence. As Castells has long argued, ours is now an urban experience. And as constructions of race and gender maintain, and the inequalities that are at the core of capitalism can show no tendency to disappear, so it must seem that urban life is for many a way station to purgatory, if not hell itself. This is why cities are labeled 'evil' (Schorske, 1998). Indeed, Zhou et al. remind us that for some years, Mao Zedong simply sent millions of urban Chinese back to the farms in an effort to reverse this migration (Zhou, Dai, & Bu, in press)

Because cities contain people—people who consume energy and create waste much more spectacularly than their country cousins—it is inevitable that (even as inanimate assemblages) they are blamed for the misdeeds of their residents. We blame urban form,

urban location, urban density, urban size—urban existence in general—for diminished lives and environmental stress. As a consequence, the millennium has seen the emergence of several discourses that label the city an illegitimate entity. Coupled with apocalyptic visions of social, economic and environmental collapse (Hornborg, 2009), these portray a future in which large parts of cities or even entire cities must be changed or be abandoned (e.g. Ross, 2011).

Such arguments lay claim to what is sometimes termed 'powerful knowledge' (Young, 2009). This is part of a continuous process of contestation that has followed the postmodern interlude, during which evidential claims collapsed and legitimacy could be asserted from any direction. It is now customary to see the production of knowledge as a strategic activity rather than as a search for some truth, that we might call in this context a 'science of cities' (Batty, 2012). This paper argues that, in the struggle for powerful knowledge, the complex empirical realities of urban change have been increasingly simplified. They have been distorted by a series of normative filters: 'what is' has been subordinated to 'that which should be'. When Ellin writes "there is now a virtual consensus among planners and urban designers about what constitutes good urbanism" she is alluding to a tightly-bound orthodoxy that admits little dissent (2012, p. 1). It also has little time for non-conforming empirical evidence, as we shall see.

The struggle for powerful knowledge

Sprawl

The emergence of a science of climate change is perhaps the most interesting contemporary example of what we can characterize as the production of knowledge. It is certainly the most visible

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—and likely successful—effort to create powerful knowledge. Self-styled ‘senior scientists’ have employed their credentials in one field to claim legitimacy for their views in a new field that now extends across atmospheric science, weather and meteorology, and environmental studies. In so doing, they have created a large infrastructure of new journals, research funding opportunities, graduate student stipends and new university institutes. At least one educational institution has turned itself almost entirely over to climate change and sustainability (Carlson, 2011).

It is not possible here to examine quite how this field has emerged or even its efficacy. It is though of great importance how this evolution has come to shape our views of what constitutes ‘the good city’. The focus upon greenhouse gases has defined our grasp of what constitutes desirable urban form—that which is dense and which limits the use of the automobile. This is hardly a novel insight, as it is a restatement of the argument developed by Mumford and his contemporaries in the second half of the 20th century, namely that the growth patterns of the suburban world would lead inexorably to necropolis.

In the 21st century, this criticism of auto-dependent urban form has become commonplace. Here is a typical example, from an empirical analysis of tornado impacts in the Midwest US.

Urban growth is a normal and inevitable fact; urban sprawl is not. Urban sprawl represents a specific type of growth distinct from traditional development. One of the most widely attributed features used to describe sprawl is the presence of low-density developments where individual structures and groups of developments are widely spaced . . . The division of land uses is another defining characteristic of sprawl. There is a lack of commingled zoning types, particularly commercial and residential, that is common among more established towns. Residential areas are developed in pods that are connected by feeder roads that lead to the main thoroughfares. This type of growth results in the dependence on vehicles to get to the other zones for shopping, working, and recreation. This division is in contrast to the traditional model for development where housing, businesses, recreational areas, and government facilities are commingled and do not require the use of vehicles to get from one place to another (Hall & Ashley, 2008, p. 209).

Note how a stark contrast between normality and abnormality is established: in the normal, organic urban world, land-uses commingle, whereas sprawl is planned to produce auto-dependent residential zones hermetically separated from other land-uses. Yet while the latter may have been correct for the earliest post-war garden suburbs, there is no evidence offered for the normality of the former. Indeed, the phrase “commingled zoning types” is something of an oxymoron, as zoning is the habitual process of planning the separation of urban activities. With perhaps the exception of the very smallest settlements, a century of urban geography has shown how the processes of production, consumption and governance produce predictable morphologies (e.g. Whitehand, 2001).

As a key part of the lexicon of contemporary design norms, sprawl has come to signify all urban growth that is not occurring vertically. Consequently, the term sprawl is used in lax and even inconsistent ways to negatively characterize any form of urban growth which involves an enlarged footprint, regardless of whether the city is also growing in population (Galster et al. 2001). As Galster and colleagues indicated, large cities are generally described as ‘sprawling’, regardless of their population density. Los Angeles, for instance, is one of the denser cities in the US, whose initial layout depended upon public transport, but its image will forever be of a series of suburbs connected via freeways. It is routinely employed as an example of sprawl, in ways that

metropolitan areas such as Detroit and Boston are not, despite their extensive—and expanding—footprint (e.g. Ewing, 1997).

Sprawl is an inherently negative signifier, and its use places a particular grid of meaning across any empirical evidence. For instance, in the paper introduced above, the analysis clearly indicates that lower-density development is desirable in locations vulnerable to tornadoes, as the **number** of dwellings likely to be damaged, and the consequent number of injuries and even **fatalities**, is reduced. Hall and Ashley, however, choose instead to emphasize that suburbs tend to contain more expensive dwellings, and therefore that sprawl is undesirable as it results in higher damage **costs** (2008).

As we shall see, this is an empirical complexity that resurfaces in all urban/suburban comparisons, namely that the latter tend to contain newer, larger homes and the former tend to contain older, smaller homes or apartments. We might infer that had suburban development never occurred, we would have continued to live in smaller dwellings, responsibly using less space and less energy. Yet there are refutations to this logic: as Hirt reminds us, the long Soviet interlude (1945–1989) acted as a design experiment for East European cities and their residents (Hirt, in press). Population growth was accommodated vertically. We might assume that this was a long enough period to establish the desirability of dense urban living; yet the period post-1989 has been one of immediate suburban development. In part this is what international design and construction corporations know best, but also because there was pent-up demand for increased space.

In his discussion of the ‘triumph of cities’ Glaeser assesses the rightness of cities and the wrongness of suburbs with a good deal of economic and public policy sophistication. He focuses on the role of the automobile (although providing a long exegesis on the foot, the wheel and the horse), while downplaying that street cars and suburban railways played such a role in defining the form of so many great cities (Glaeser, 2011, pp. 167–74). The automobile was thus hardly a game changer, but it has allowed more people to live in scattered neighborhoods and to spend their leisure time in scattered locations. His chosen example of undesirable development is Houston, which he describes in withering terms (while acknowledging its affordable housing, a point to return to below). However, cars notwithstanding, his critique rests as much on the basic prejudice that it is simply in the wrong place: “all those 90°F days and all that humidity mean that Houston is a ravenous consumer of electricity” (Glaeser, 2011, p. 197). Here then is a more visceral condemnation against sprawl—it is wasteful of natural resources, and it is wasteful because it is in the Sunbelt, which is an inhospitable locale into which we should never have ventured; New Yorker Ross makes the same criticism of Phoenix, albeit without the humidity (Ross, 2010).¹

This is surely a compelling case—except for the empirical details. Objective studies of potential energy demand by Sivak (2008) reveal that Houston is actually the **best** continental city with regards to ‘degree days’, beaten only by communities in California and Florida whose climates are coastal temperate (degree days are those requiring energy to cool or heat to a comfortable level). Mild winters keep potential energy use low, and significantly lower than cities with long winters, such as Minneapolis or Buffalo, and even New York, which annually registers 33% worse than Houston, according to Sivak’s methodology (2008). Nor does this take into account that the carbon footprint associated nationally with cooling is less than with heating. Electricity generates

¹ Glaeser is unusual in that his book strives for a global reach. It is hard though to come away from a reading of it without the impression that there is a hierarchy of good places, which New York dominates; it is the obligation of those in agreement with that position to rein in the excesses of suburban America, so that, in turn, sprawl limits can be imposed on India and China (p. 15).

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