



Smart city-regionalism across Seattle: Progressing transit nodes in labor space?



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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, the four-county Seattle city-region has built one of the few ‘containment’ regimes in the United States. Metropolitan development policy is organized around growth management and transport principles that seek to ameliorate the ecological, economic, and social effects of both suburban sprawl and economic segregation. In addition to regionally-coordinated urban growth boundaries, which implode new growth back to already serviced lands, planning for regional sustainability therefore also includes strategic efforts to improve extant jobs-housing imbalances through major transit investments in key urban centers. This paper considers Greater Seattle’s recent policy experiences with planning transit communities from the perspectives of the regional labor market and state policies organized around sustainability. The paper explores the critical concern that while agglomeration economies continue to produce a variety of employment centers across metropolitan space, relatively scarce public transit investments might be directed invariably to edifying economic centers populated by social elites who already enjoy multiple mobility choices.

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1. Introduction

“While the beneficiaries of entrepreneurial redevelopment are often those private businesses, developers, investors and politicians that depend upon the urban land market and exchange...the story is perhaps not quite so simple or straightforward as implied by such sweeping generalizations.... [A]long with the rise of urban governance there has also been a rescaling of urban management institutions and the politics of redistribution to the metropolitan-regional scale.”—Jonas and McCarthy (2009, p. 302)

For many years now scholars and practitioners in the USA, Canada, and increasingly elsewhere too, have tried to reconstruct the policy framework through which the spatial management of metropolitan growth is imagined. Coalescing around a breezy but influential catchphrase—smart growth—the US planning profession, in particular, has ostensibly enjoyed fruitful alliances with state lawmakers, governors, mayors, councilors, federal officials, business associations, environmental groups, and labor unions. Heading into the mid-2010s, for all its battle scars, smart growth constitutes a core component of the expected governance agenda of numerous large metropolitan regions and even a few US states. As Schneider (2008, p. 2) notes, planning for smart growth that, in

turn, seeks to promote the broader sustainability of regional economies and metropolitan societies – i.e. smart city-regionalism – has been “steadily embedded in new executive orders, legislative policy and new state law across the country.”

This significant development in metropolitan governance and spatial planning has generated several strands of urban and regional research of relevance here (Addison et al., 2013). A first strand focuses on defining and debating what smart growth (might) mean and for whom (Burchell et al., 2000; Downs, 2005; Knaap and Talen, 2005; Litman, 2009; Millera and Hoelb, 2002; Song, 2012); on how it (might) differ from earlier efforts at, for example, urban growth management and/or urban growth control, particularly in regard to regional-scale planning (Daniels, 2001; Dierwechter, 2008; Hamin et al., 2006; Scott, 2007); and on what components of this synoptic vision for metropolitan space appear to generate the most (and least) agreement politically (de la Cruz, 2009; Downs, 2001). A second strand of research, targeted at practitioners, identifies how to “do” smart growth, wherein broader theoretical questions, scale problems, and/or nuances are deliberately deemphasized in favor of applied policy design, institutional reform, and concrete action (Ewing and King, 2005; International City/County Management Association and Smart Growth Network, 2006). Here “best practices” are commonly identified, valorized, and then circulated through key governance networks such as the Environmental Protection Agency (2012).

A third strand of research focuses on sober if still sympathetic policy evaluations – that is to say, on addressing the extent to

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which smart growth delivers as advertised, mostly on its own terms (Bullard, 2007; Carlson and Dierwechter, 2007; de la Cruz, 2009; Edwards and Haines, 2007; Green Leigh and Hoelzel, 2012; Landis, 2006; Smart Growth America, 2011; Szold and Carbonell, 2002; Talen and Knaap, 2003; Weitz and Moore, 1998). In contrast, a final area of smart growth research offers critique, skepticism, and at times dissent. Interestingly, this comes from many different directions. The US libertarian right, as the outstanding example, is unreceptive to planning politics more generally and smart growth doctrine in particular. As just another planning fad, smart growth is a form of “creeping socialism” and therefore undesirable (O’Toole, 2000). More mainstream, and more convincing, urban-economic epistemologies derived from “grand theoretical” ontologies simply question the core propositions of smart growth theory and practice, such as the generative and inherently progressive role of public transit investments, the theoretical rationality of planning itself, or the presumed illegibility and therefore political undesirability of sprawl (Bogart, 2006; Gordon and Richardson, 2001).

Geographers have, until recently, ceded most smart growth ground to planners, a microcosm of their macrocosmic disengagement with planning stories more generally (Huxley, 2008). This is starting to change (Gibbs et al., 2013). A decade ago, Heather Campbell and Phil Harrison (2004, p. 2) could observe accurately that “a scan of geography journals reveals few articles that have addressed planning as an idea or activity.” Today critical geographers of space, state, and planning relations, particularly those focused on the economic rise of city-regions and the (geo)politics of city-regionalism(s) (Brenner, 1997; Jonas, 2011, 2012; McGuirk, 2010), are reconsidering the metropolitan role of smart growth in the US (Tretter, 2013; Goetz, 2013), Canada (Keil, 2002; Macdonald and Keil, 2012), and elsewhere as part of the larger architecture of neoliberal vs. progressive vs. radical “region-building” (Dierwechter, 2008; Krueger, 2010; Krueger and Gibbs, 2008; Scott, 2007); broader dynamics of state–society–economy co-transformations (Krueger and Agyeman, 2005; Jonas et al., 2010; Keil, 2002; Tretter, 2013); and eco-state and scalar restructuring (Jonas and Ward, 2007; Krueger and Savage, 2007).

As *urban space*, in other words, smart growth is increasingly interpreted by critical geographers as part and parcel of a rescaled, contested, search for a post-fordist, post-Keynesian political economy. Tassilo Herrschel (2013), as a recent case in point, argues that, in both Vancouver and Seattle at least, smart growth/smartness’ is increasingly tasked with “squaring the circle” between competitiveness and sustainability. That is no small job. Smart growth, or its component policy aspects and ancillary ambitions, is theorized, therefore, through extensive geographies of capitalist regulation and global (un)sustainability and through the nascent “geopolitics” of territorial change and social conflict (Dierwechter, 2013; Jonas, 2012; Jonas and McCarthy, 2009)—issues less prominently developed or fully mapped in the (far-larger) urban planning and urban studies literatures (see Gibbs et al., 2013).

Following Beauregard, we need not ask if one way of theorizing smart growth is “best for urban scholarship,” whether it be critical urban geography, urban planning, urban economics, or urban history – that is “irritatingly sectarian”; more practically, smart growth is complex enough to necessitate “a pluralist conversation” (Beauregard, 2012, p. 476; cf. Wyley, 2011). With such pluralism in mind, the motivation of this paper is to push extant inquiries into smart growth as a new type of urban space within new city-regional settings, particularly major claims prominent in urban planning and critical urban geography, respectively (Fig. 1).

In particular, the analytical concerns of the discussion below are those efforts by a multi-scaled coalition within (and beyond) metropolitan Seattle to confect a new archipelago of “transit communities” as part and parcel of a much broader and more complex territorial project – a leading American exemplar, I suggest, of

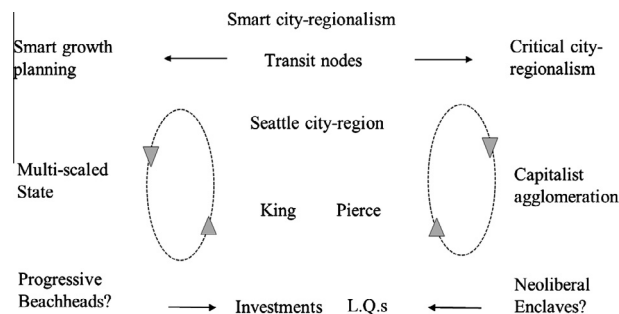


Fig. 1. Analytical framework for the paper.

smart city-regionalism. In recent decades, the four-county Seattle city-region has built one of the few “containment” regimes in the United States. Metropolitan development policy is therefore organized around smart growth and transport principles that seek to ameliorate the ecological, economic, and social effects of both suburban sprawl and economic segregation. In addition to regionally-coordinated urban growth boundaries, which implode new growth back to already serviced lands, planning for regional sustainability includes efforts to improve extant jobs-housing imbalances through transit investments in key urban centers. Rather than facilitate further sprawl, in other words, Seattle’s various “containment” (i.e. anti-sprawl) policies seek to reshape future urban growth into denser, functionally mixed, transit-supportive, financially responsible, and sustainable forms.

As illustrated in Fig. 1, this paper considers metropolitan Seattle’s recent policy experiences with growing transit communities as a case study in smart city-regionalism – first from the perspective of the regional labor market. Indeed, linking smart growth policies with labor geographies, including problems of mobility, class and sustainability (e.g. Hanson, 2010; Hanson and Pratt, 1995), is a neglected research theme that this paper seeks to advance. I therefore explore critical concerns that, while agglomeration economies in contemporary capitalism will produce a remarkable variety of employment centers across metropolitan space, relatively scarce public investments will be directed invariably to edifying economic centers populated by social elites who already enjoy multiple mobility choices. Methodologically, I deploy location quotients to remap transit nodes as labor space, wherein smart city-regionalism across Seattle largely reproduces “elite enclaves” that comport with wider readings of capitalist spatial restructuring – and thus with themes common in geo-political discussions of neoliberal urban governance.

At the same time, I also want to analyze, from a second and more explicitly political perspective, complex policy efforts by the state to progress these transit nodes in ways that, I argue, complicate any rush to what Jonas and McCarthy (2009) call “sweeping generalizations” about the new territorialities of city-regionalism. Like a few other US city-regions, I show that Greater Seattle too is subject to “the rescaling of urban management institutions and the politics of redistribution.” (op cit.). Here a leading concern is to reshape metropolitan space around an interconnected series of “progressive beachheads” that service a complex range of territorial goals, including concerns with regional equity.

Methodologically, I switch to a brief discussion of new funding efforts by federal, regional and local actors to engage community-based agents in the more equitable production of city-regional space. Rather than see the multi-scaled state as “captured” by capital, such a reading instead allows us to accept that, yes, capital conditions the state, but also to open up more nuanced readings of the “vertical and territorial” diversity of the state as it assembles in very different ways in one region or locality than in another

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