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Thom Malone, Christian L. Redfearn



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# Shocks & Ossification: The Durable Hierarchy of Neighborhoods in U.S. Metropolitan Areas from 1970 to 2010

Thom Malone\*  
Graduate School of Design  
Harvard University

Christian L. Redfearn†  
Price School of Public Policy  
University of Southern California

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## Abstract

We examine neighborhood hierarchies and ask how durable they are over time. Despite the substantial changes that have occurred in metropolitan America from 1970 to 2010, we find remarkable persistence in the rank of census tracts by population density, income, education, and house prices, with many MSAs having rank correlations of over 0.75. Racial and ethnic variables appear to be less persistent, but all the variables exhibit a significant trend toward more stability over time. Even in the presence of large shocks to the metropolitan economy, a majority of MSAs retain the same basic spatial hierarchy they had decades ago. We also find that disturbances to hierarchies are highly spatially correlated. This pattern of stability and change has significant implications for how we analyze and understand urban areas and the way they change.

## 1 Introduction

Neighborhood change is well studied. Gentrification, suburbanization, filtering, racial tipping, local economic development, and more broadly, the dynamics of firm and household location choice all have rich and long-established literatures.<sup>1</sup> However, there has been little study of how these individual mechanisms result in changes in how urban areas are organized. That is, we routinely focus on significant partial equilibrium results but do not ask about the larger context in which they occur. To this point there has been little formal documentation of how stable neighborhoods

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\*tmalone@gsd.harvard.edu

†redfearn@usc.edu, corresponding author. Thanks to USC's Lusk Center for Real Estate for support, to Leah Brooks, Gabriel Ehrlich and Jeff Lin for excellent feedback, and to Dan McMillen and the participants at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy Urban Economics and Public Finance Conference, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>1</sup>See Card, Mas, and Rothstein (2008), Guerrieri, Hartley, and Hurst (2013), Brueckner and Rosenthal (2009), Rosenthal (2008), Baum-Snow (2007), Bayer, Ferreira, and McMillan (2007) for just a few examples.

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