

THE AMERICAN DOWNTOWN : STORIES FOR THE PRESENT

The Downtown today

"The rise in downtown living is the success story of the last two decades of the century" : Eugenie Birch and the UPenn/Fannie Mae foundation study, 1999. Data from the study includes the following : Downtown residential growth is now at the same rate as for metropolitan areas. The trend is twenty years old. Compared to cities and metropolitan areas, the downtown is more racially and ethnically diverse, and bipolar in terms of education and income. People downtown preponderantly live in non-family situations (only 17% of downtowners are under 20). Downtowners rent at twice the rate as compared to residents in the MSAs, and downtown densities in general are higher than for cities e.g. in Philadelphia 68% greater than the rest of city, Boston 53%, Seattle 35%. Future projections : Houston projects its central city population will quadruple by 2010, Philadelphia by 13%, Chicago by 32%. (The Economist)

How secure can we be about such projections ? (Between 1930 and 1950, Boston added only a single office tower but built 60 between 1965 and 1987.)

What does this mean ?

Various reasons are given in the literature : public sector incentives, subsidies and infrastructure improvements ; prosperous economy and investors' reuse of obsolete buildings ; BID's active role in marketing ; favorable press ; perceived lack of culture in suburbs ; less urban crime ; gentrification reducing poor population in downtown ; service jobs remaining in or returning to downtown ; more people wanting to live close to where they work ; more old people in the population ; young professionals delaying marriage and child-rearing ; empty-nesting etc.

Four stories

For the purposes of our discussion, here are a few stories, somewhat oblique, possibly contentious, overlapping perspectives (perhaps even hypotheses) on the downtown today.

1) **Dynamic Balance**

on electronic dispersion : *The business man may sit at home in his library and bargain, discuss, promise, hint, threaten, tell such lies as he dare not write, and, in fact, do everything that once demanded a personal encounter.*

on simultaneous centralization : *And so the centre will be essentially a bazaar, a great gallery of shops and places of concourse and rendezvous, a pedestrian place, its pathways reinforced by lifts and moving platforms and shielded from the weather, and altogether a very spacious, brilliant, and entertaining agglomeration.*
H.G.Wells, 1901

Wells' proposition argues for the inevitability of a kind of biological homeostasis : the more you go one way, the more you compensate to maintain equilibrium. Thus, in his story, you have both low density dispersion by electronic communication and high-density face-to-face intensity in the center. Instead of one substituting for the other, the result is an increase in both.

The effects of machine-interposed communication systems have conventionally and wrongly been seen as propogating only low-density urban decongestion. Especially so with current technologies and the massive lowering of interaction costs, which has caused The Economist to proclaim the "death of distance".

What have we learned from the last major electronic communication invention : the telephone ? In the mid-1890's everyone believed the telephone would keep people on the farms. Then 34% of America's workforce were farmers. In 1970 the percentage was 4%. The telephone made rural life more tolerable but it didn't reverse migration to cities. Similarly, the telephone made suburbs more possible but at the same time it enabled the skyscraper and increased downtown congestion.

As for Wells' "brilliant and entertaining agglomeration", how about Jane Thompson's current reflections on Times Square as "fast changing dramatic light and color in the most oversized surface statements ever made", or Time magazine's comments on John Portman's hotels in Atlanta as "razzle-dazzle fantasy buildings full of ...glass-enclosed elevators and...multistory lobbies garnished with trees, fountains and cafes....known in the trade as 'Jesus Christ' hotels" because when seen for the first time, visitors gasp 'Je-sus Chee-rist'.

The contemporary US city, in the manner of Wells, is simultaneously "spectacle and sprawl". "Sprawl" is a current word, poorly defined and its effects and what to do about them are still debated. We use words such as "sprawl" until we know more. The term "slums" was used in the 19th Century as both noun and verb until the culture of poverty was better understood. It is no longer used in serious discussion. In the US city it has appropriately been replaced by a historical term of racial exclusion : the "ghetto".

Does poverty in the US city ,relate to either downtown growth or sprawl ? What role does space play in the condition of poverty ? (There are so many who automatically answer, yes : see the many 19th century Booths, Soria Y Matas etc., who saw salvation for the poor in the countryside.) The answer isn't very clear. In the ten cities that led the nation in downtown office development from 1950 to 1984 there was higher unemployment in 1982 than in 1970. New York and Chicago, the two tops in office construction, had as many as one person in four living in poverty in 1985. As for sprawl ? Downs (1999) says that " I came to the conclusion that there is no meaningful and significant statistical relationship between any of the specific traits of sprawl... and either measure of urban decline. It went against my belief that sprawl had contributed to concentrated poverty and therefore to urban decline."

2) Groups in Ascendance

Brady Bunch, circa 1960 *The Brady family consists of a never-other-than-happy architect father, a pert wife, a housekeeper and six children, all white. They smile their way through each episode of life in the suburbs, each day resolving such issues as the length of the girls' skirts and the boys' sibling rivalry. The house confirms the family's optimism. It is modern and plain and the staircase is open with a few diagonal supports. There is easy access to an outside which seems always accessible and friendly.*

Diff'rent Strokes, circa 1980 *Mr. Drummond, a wealthy white widower superintends (with a housekeeper) over his natural daughter and two adopted sons who are black. The Drummond house is rich and decorated : the columns are Corinthian, the balustrade seems like sculpted marble, and coy nymphs watch over the staircase. The house is only an interior. Outside is hostile, so typical episodes warn against the taking of candy or rides from strange men on the street or succumbing to the temptation to join street gangs.*

These television stories, so we suggest, are descriptive of the social and physical environment of those groups in cities who are then claiming attention, groups who are temporarily in ascendance. These change regularly, perhaps every generation in the USA, a turnover from which one might read about how television sees the city, even perhaps the "good" city, over time. In these sitcoms we move from the monochromatic, socially and spatially free suburbs of the Bradys (when homeownership in the US had triumphed) to, some twenty years later, the mixed, enclosed and dangerous downtown, a diverse world predicting the even more diverse world of the current downtown. Who is the ascendant group today? Are they young, single, smart, moneyed, all-over-the place, renters of space in the downtown ? Seinfeld?

Mr. John Williams of Post Properties and a recent downtown convert and developer in Atlanta, is described by the New York Times as "Denouncing the suburbs as eyesores and breeding grounds for neurotic youth." Now, he says, "You couldn't get me to live in the suburbs for all the tea in China." How widespread is this image of the suburbs and how many are exercising the downtown option as a result ? Surveys have consistently shown overwhelming preference by Americans for single-family houses on large lots : some years ago William Michelsen published his findings under the title, "Most People Don't Want What Architects Want". Yet, Gordon and Richardson now point out that half of the attached housing in the US is in fact located outside central cities, and that in Los Angeles, seen conventionally as the most spread-out of American cities, the urbanized area of the metropolitan region has the highest residential densities in the country.

Diversity is a relative measure. In the non-suburban downtown, there are few children and teenagers. As rents rise in the downtown through the influx of the wealthier, fewer poor people can remain. Henri Lefebvre, the French urbanist, has pointed to this phenomenon in the European city where the poor are exported from the city's historic center to the periphery and, in his terms, deprived of their "right to the town." Residential growth by wealthy immigration to the downtown may be a zero-sum game, municipal budgets having to cope with the better services and improvements required by the newcomers.

Yet the downtown is seen as the most diverse site in the US city. Here diversity is a function of density, many people having to cope with others in a confined space. But without the young or the poor, one might wonder about the difference in the downtown compared to that in non-downtown ethnic neighborhoods. In the downtown, more people put their bodies on display in a public environment, and the possibilities of a communion with difference is greater. On a summer's evening, the only place in Boston where there are more than a few people in one place is in Fenway Park watching the Red Sox. (In the wonderfully confused manner of cities, the Red Sox are a private corporation providing a public service that the public cannot.) As the grain of American cities gets coarser, and if the downtown can attract families and be a decent host for the less wealthy, it will be a potent setting for the presence of otherness in the increasingly multi-cultural city.

3) Image Construction

Compostela, Galicia, circa 1098 *Although beheaded by Herod in AD 42, the body relic of St. James was magically discovered by a hermit in a cave in Galicia at the beginning of the ninth century. To elevate the saint's importance and give identity to the shrine, an aggressive campaign was undertaken. A compilation of publicity for the city, the CODEX CALIXTINUS, was invented; a corporate logo, the scallop shell, was devised to be worn by pilgrims; a guide to the French places pilgrims would encounter on their trip was published; and even a unique food, the Coquille St. Jacques, was concocted. Compostela overtook Jerusalem and Rome as pilgrim venues and became the "Christian Mecca".*

Clinton, Montana, 1998 *Just after July 4, 1998, TIME magazine invited its readers to "come and visit seven places that do something better than anyone else does. They tend not to brag too much, so we'll do it for them." One of the TIME seven is Clinton, Montana, home of an annual Testicle Festival, where last September 15,000 people came to eat Rocky Mountain Oysters (delicately defined by TIME as "the business part of the bull"). The Festival's founder, a retired school superintendant, now a bar owner, says "a bar has to have a signature event...I don't care if its maggot races." TIME concludes that "a town needs identity, or it doesn't exist."*

These stories are both about the inevitable construction by cities of an image which can attract outsiders. A moral position may well distinguish between the value of religious belief (Compostela) as opposed to scatological entertainment (Clinton), but the identities of both of these far-off places were deliberately created to attract visitors who had the opportunity to go elsewhere. Both offered rewards, the one heavenly and painful, the other earthly and pleasurable. In Compostela they built an august and permanent cathedral ; in Clinton they eat and drink beer in the open. For designers, these are only programmatic distinctions.

Lewis Mumford argued that the earliest cities were "magnets" rather than "containers". In the contemporary US city the downtown is the place that cities market for tourists. It is where convention centers are now built or rebuilt faster and larger than ever before ; add to this a historic district, a revived industrial waterfront, a festival marketplace, a domed stadium and an aquarium, and you have the ingredients of a contemporary protocol of tourist promotion.

Visitors add to the density and diversity of the downtown and increase its markets. There are more restaurants, clubs and taxis for residents to share with outsiders. Here we might ponder again the Wellsian dynamic balance argument. Increased information about places obtained electronically encourages people to travel actually. And this will enlarge the tourist market and, in turn, the need for cities to sell the uniqueness and wonder of their downtowns. The electronic universe may also stimulate electronic tourism. Since 1995 thousands have claimed space in the Internet city of AlphaWorld where at minimal cost they build their dream palaces and spend imagined time. Is there a virtual downtown in our future ?

How different are the images of the city marketed to visitors from those which inform the city's own citizens ? For the few hundred years in Medieval Italy which preceded the discovery of printing, citizens wrote books praising their cities to attract visitors but also to inform their own citizens. So also for the widespread tradition of "books of merit" in Islam. Orienting similar messages to the outside and to the inside may enhance local civic pride and an awareness of the value of a good environment. Realizing that a well-formed city is its own best advertisement may diminish the need to manufacture one artificially. Does Paris need to be sold ? And a well-informed city may also be one where the quality of design is the highest.

4) Culture Shift

on the late 19th Century European city *Blocks of new buildings ...rich with decoration and graced with statues, the streets between...roofed over with glass at a great height, the pavements all of smooth and variegated marble...- little tables all over these marble streets, people sitting at them, eating, drinking, or smoking- crowds of other people strolling by- such is the Arcade. I should like to live in it all my life.*
Mark Twain

on the late 20th Century European city *I had seen the boulevards of Paris, and magnificent cities like Zurich. I thought to myself, 'There must be a better way to build cities like this in America.' I knew it was'nt just a matter of architecture. Someone had to plan them. I wanted that someone to be me.*

Dean Macris, Planning Director of San Francisco, who grew up in small town celebrated mainly for its proximity to Mark Twain's hometown, Hannibal.

These impressions are intended to be less about what we might call an "environmental deficit" that certain Americans – in this case both from small Midwest towns - feel about European cities, but more about the elusive idea of a cultural shift which has recently impacted America and especially the downtowns of its cities, moving it closer to some of the images that Twain and Macris so envied in Europe.

To what extent have changed attitudes to health, food, joy and sex, to mention some of what we might include in the broad notion of cultural shift, impacted the American downtown and made it more attractive as a place to live and visit? There seems little theory to explain what we all see around us. Some analysts point to increased disposable wealth, the effects of immigrants to the society, more travel, electronic information, reports of health studies and the concept that is now used to explain most things, globalization. These to explain the spread of ethnic restaurants, health clubs, coffee bars, and entertainment zones. And the phenomenon seems not to be restricted to this country. Jan Gehl has studied the proliferation of coffee bars in Copenhagen and comments on the Italianization of the Danes who drink cappuccino in blankets. Perhaps Malcolm Gladwell may be able to explain the cappuccino epidemic.

Or maybe the Wellsian formula holds. For all the intense time spent in the sealed offices of the international financial cores of American cities, many may seek the intimate and random connection of the coffee bar. If the coffee bar is a release from the international office, Richard Sennett's story of the early coffee bar near the London docks, a venue for maritime gossip which later became Lloyds of London, is about the opposite : the coffee bar as the generator of the international office.

Is the phenomenon of the coffee bar imported from Europe or is it an enlargement of the Main Street barber shop where people socialized and wasted time in smaller communities? Whether it is Eurourbanism or not doesn't seem to matter as much as the fact that places for social and pedestrian activity are increasingly available in the American downtown. And, unlike formalistic borrowing from Europe, such as the constantly problematic City Hall Plaza in Boston, the coffee bar on the street is rooted in everyday life and not an idealized projection. The coffee bar is part of a larger web in which entertainment has become the needed additive to ordinary activities such as shopping : buying brand sneakers inside a pleasure palace, for instance, or as Lester Thurow has commented on places to buy books : "Amazon.com's success has not stopped new bookstores from being built. But they are very different bookstores. They come with coffee bars, sandwich shops, fireplaces, and lounge chairs. They are places to socialize. You may be paying 20% more for the book, but you are having fun, and it is worth paying more."

If commerce provides fun, historic preservation gives another kind of nourishment to downtowners and tourists. It triggers memory and associations, it speaks of stability and permanence and the past (which Europeans have so much of and which mobile Americans apparently lack). It ultimately adds to the density of experience, a commodity which the downtown still has more of than anywhere else in the American city.

Julian Beinart

May 2000

WILL INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY HELP IMPROVE CITY AND REGIONAL FORM ?

PANEL SYMPOSIUM WITH MITCHELL, CASTELLS, DUFFY AND JB

THURSDAY, APRIL 12 , 2001

1) My answer to the question is a **guarded yes**, perhaps because I'm an optimist ; but , despite many claims , I don't see much evidence yet to answer the question differently.

1) But firstly, let me congratulate Manuel Castells on receiving the Kevin Lynch award today.

His writing on today's subject is exemplary in studying the emergence of a new technology and its space without sidestepping the complexity of the economic, social, political and cultural processes that shape the effects of the technology. He avoids the easy one-line extrapolations that so often accompany the advent of new technologies. (Edison)

I can't avoid giving an example : In one of last year's many peeks into the future, the architect Wes Jones writes in TIME magazine (Feb. 21,2000) :

Computers promote a dramatic trend toward decentralization, allowing people to spread out and live and work anywhere.

(This despite the fact that downtown residential growth in US cities is now at the same rate as for metropolitan areas)

OR *The vastness of cyberspace increasingly satisfies the craving for more space, so the house and yard will shrink to a more supportable size.*

(This despite the fact that the average US house is now 50% larger than in 1970 while family size has declined by about 20%)

Maybe I am too harsh. This is TIME magazine, after all.

2) One futurist whom I do believe, however, is HG Wells, who exactly 100 years ago, wrote that electronic dispersion would be accompanied by simultaneous centralization. I quote :

on electronic dispersion : *The business man may sit at home in his library and bargain, discuss, promise, hint, threaten, tell such lies as he dare not write, and, in fact, do everything that once demanded a personal encounter.*

on simultaneous centralization : *And so the centre will be essentially a bazaar, a great gallery of shops and places of concourse and rendezvous, a pedestrian place, its pathways reinforced by lifts and moving platforms and shielded from the weather, and altogether a very spacious, brilliant, and entertaining agglomeration.*

H.G.Wells, 1901

Wells' proposition argues for the inevitability of the search for balance , a notion borrowed from

biological homeostasis. The more you go one way, the more you compensate by going in the other way. Thus, in his story, you have both low density dispersion and high-density face-to-face (or in his case) body-to-body concentration. Instead of one substituting for the other, the result is an increase in both.

Wells was writing at a time when urbanism's prophets' so often saw the city as one-dimensionally pathological : for example, in response to Bellamy's gentle portrait of Boston as a communistic industrial enclave, Willam Morris wrote News from Nowhere to proclaim the absolute desertion of industrial London, and the gentle Prince Kropotkin saw the electrical grid as disurbanizing Moscow. London proceeds despite : the last of the world's largest cities that disappeared was almost exactly 1 millenium ago. We don't abandon cities anymore : we adjust to their inertia. Just as the British compensated by inventing the mortgage system and the urban railroad which, among other factors, reditributed London at a density less than half that of Paris.

But the homestatic argument has its attraction as explanation. Let me give a few such examples :

- a) The last major electronic communication invention, the telephone, now about 130 years old, made rural life more tolerable but it didn't reverse migration to cities. (In the mid-1980's 34% of America's workforce were farmers. in 1970 the percentage was 4%) Similarly the telephone helped make suburbs possible, but at the same time it enabled the skyscraper and urban congestion. (To paraphrase Wells, the US city is now both sprawl and spectacle.)
- b) We might now see the footlooseness of industry ^{as} accompanied by the increased attraction of local place, the increase in the value of places which Walter Isard once taught me here at MIT to call "Irreplaceable on-site amenities". Do spatial freedom and place uniqueness combine to make Cambridge county in England the fastest growing county in the country ? (And the Alliance example) (intermodalities : airport, #35, Santa Fe railroad)
- c) And, in the realm of the formal, does the regressive and historicist formalism of the "new urbanism" flourish in the evenescent world of what Manuel Castells calls "the space of flows" ? (Eurodisney conference story) ?
- d) And could one make the case that despite some 20 million or so non-farm employees in the US working at home as part of their primary job, and this projected to increase considerably, miles travelled by auto and congestion levels keep on increasing ?

I come back to my initial inability to give an unqualified answer to the question posed to us this afternoon . Perhaps growing up as an architect in the brutal politics of apartheid has left me with a Ruskinian perspective, one that looks simultaneously for beauty and social fairness. Perhaps. But I find myself still answering questions at cocktail parties when asked what I think is wrong with American cities by saying that seem to me both **unnecessarily socially inequitable and unnecessarily ugly.** ^{they}

If I believe this, I must ask how the emerging information technology will improve these conditions. Allow me a little license to put forward a slightly sceptical position, if only for the sake of our discussion.

In the UNDP's Human Development Report released in 1999, these are some figures : in 1960 the wealthiest 20% of the world's population earned 30 times more than the bottom fifth; now they earn 74 times more. The report states that "writing computer programs and revealing genetic codes have replaced the search for gold, the conquest of land and the command of machinery as the path to economic power." Access to the Internet is limited to the top 20% of the world's population. 80% of the world's web sites are in English, spoken by less than 10% of the world's population. There are more computers in the US than the rest of the world combined. The report concludes : "Ultimately, people and nations will reject global integration and global interdependence if they do not gain from it. Pressures will mount to retreat to isolationism in economic policy, culture and in political priorities."

Locally the figures are no less worrisome. In Silicon valley, which Joel Kotkin calls "one of the world's greatest centers of wealth creation in history", top executives salaries rose 391% in the 1990's while the salaries of the Latinos and Southeast Asians who provide most of the low-skill service work, dropped by 6%. According to Kotkin, only 56% of Latinos graduate from high schools in this region and, while Latinos account for 23% of the region's population, they are barely 7% of its high-tech work force.

My second search is for less urban ugliness. This is something Morris or Ruskin would not find on the Internet today. Nor would they find popular resistance to it— as they hoped they would in late 19th C England to badly designed commercial products. As an architect I ponder about the meanings of architectural and urban form in this emerging age of information technology, or as Manuel Castells call it, "the space of flows". (e.g. Patrick's rebuilding of London to match contemporary ~~urban~~ *itermediate* *communication* *needs*.)

We might, for argument, ponder these possibilities :

- a) There is no need for a built form particularly different from what exists now : that electronic flow can accommodate to any built form, and does not demand anything special. This is something like the answer given to the question of how one would recognize the form of a global city as distinct from a non-global city ; you can't. (Sasha Suren)
- b) There are ways of shaping buildings and urban spaces, even houses perhaps, that mimic the "space of flows" and attempt to make palpable space seem like what virtual space might look like if it were palpable.
- c) Or even that the experience of what is called virtual space, allowed to us through the use of suitable equipment, might seduce us sufficiently away from our preoccupation with real space, or, to put it homeostatically, might heighten our appreciation of real space.

- d) Given the propensity of electronically supplied information to be powerfully graphic, they could enliven urban space, and be part of a new story-telling environment in cities. *(But in the absence of creating valuable content in our culture, there will be little to convey with all the lights in the world.)*
- e) Or that palpable public space has already diffused into so many parts of the city, where coffee bars sell books, where private territories maintain public purposes, and so on. That we have anyway lost the art of making good body-related public space (see Govnt Center or Rockefeller center), and that we might look for replacement in the electronic realm.
- f) Or that it is still too early to tell what an appropriate marriage of body and machine-interposed experience might be, and there is an exciting future ahead in which they help each other increase both of their strengths.

And so on. I look forward to what this might all become. Maybe our urban worlds will become less ugly. And maybe they will be the sites for greater equity. As a modernist, this is of course what we believed when we made white walls for the workers. I hope, now that we are giving them gables, we are more successful.

JB

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4.241J / 11.330J Theory of City Form
Spring 2013

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