

Theorizing the Death of Cities

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Abstract

Although ancient cities often followed a trajectory of birth, prosperity, decline, and death, modern cities have more commonly exhibited a high degree of resilience. Yet some contemporary cities—notably some of the old industrial cities of the American Midwest—seem on an inexorable course toward death. Our understanding of urban dying and death, however, lacks theoretical elaboration. This essay suggests that an assessment of a city's morbidity can be accomplished by examining the condition of a city's three principal vital urban functions: its governance capacity, its economic stewardship, and its cultural production and preservation. By assessing these we can make a judgment about the course of urban dying, though urban death—the endstate—still eludes theoretical understanding.

A glance at any map of the ancient world shows the names of dozens of cities, large and small, that no longer exist except perhaps as archeological sites. These vanished cities of antiquity grew, flourished, declined, and died. Some died from natural catastrophe; some were abandoned for mysterious reasons; others were conquered and destroyed. The “lost cities” of the desert or the jungle is a familiar concept, and modern observers hardly find this cycle of urban birth, life, and death remarkable. But the notion that modern cities might follow a similar trajectory is less familiar and more difficult to contemplate. One reason is that very few contemporary cities—many whose history began in the last two millennia or so, or in the case of the new world in the last 400 years—have actually died and disappeared. Modern social scientists have been struck in fact at how resilient existing cities are: regeneration is the common story of cities that experience the blows of severe destructive forces. Cities utterly destroyed by war or natural disaster—Hiroshima, Warsaw, Berlin, San Francisco, and so on—have reemerged from almost total devastation to flourish again. Even cities that have experienced other sorts of destructive forces—huge population declines and economic convulsions are examples—have sometimes had the capacity to regenerate and flourish

again. Boston, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia as well as some of the old industrial cities of the English Midlands are cases in point.

But now modern societies are beginning to see the decline of certain cities where the levels of social and economic morbidity are so extreme that the possibility of regeneration or renewal seems increasingly unlikely. Sharp population and job losses, sustained over long periods of time, may signal an end to these cities' very reasons for existence. Furthermore, in such situations of existential transformations no alternative basis for recovery or vitality can reasonably be imagined. By all indicators, then, these seem to be what we can only characterize as dying cities, and we are challenged to understand—or to theorize—the notion of urban dying and death in the modern world. At this point, we may believe that some cities are dying, but we do not entirely have a full understanding of the processes at work.

Clearly, severe population loss is a necessary condition for urban death. This represents the loss of taxpayers and workers and talent or to put it another way, human capacity and capital. In the United States, such places dot the older industrial Midwest, including Gary, Flint, Benton Harbor, and East St. Louis. Detroit, however, is the largest and most dramatic example. Nearly, every social scientist and informed observer writes about that city using the language of morbidity and death.¹ The basis for this judgment rests principally on the city's almost catastrophic population and job losses in the last half century and its attendant consequences, including the social dysfunctions of highly concentrated extreme poverty and the enduring effects of racial stratification. But is population loss all we need to understand the nature of urban dying? Does population loss give us enough information to make a judgment about a city's prospects? Let us theorize the diagnostic markers of urban dying.

URBAN LIFE FUNCTIONS

It is useful for theoretical purposes to employ and extend the organic analogy that posits a life cycle for cities that may eventually end with death.² Even if urban death is an uncommon occurrence and even if it lies in the very distant future, it helps us to focus on present signs of urban morbidity. The notion of morbidity as applied to cities points us to an assessment of crucial life functions that are essential to urban health and—most importantly—*make*

1. For example, George Galster writes that Detroit is “suicidal” and ends his book by writing an “epitaph” for its “grave” (2012). Mark Binelli writes an account of the city's trials and casts it as a story of Detroit's “afterlife” (2012). Charlie LeDuff sets out in his book to conduct an “autopsy” of the city (2013).

2. A minor tributary in urban studies once pursued the idea of city “life cycles,” that is, the notion that cities are capable of birth, growth, decline, and death (see, e.g., Baer, 1976; Norton, 1979). According to Susan Roberts (1991), the tradition can be traced to Victorian British writers influenced by Darwinian ideas. Whether urban death is inevitable is not addressed in this literature, nor is it theoretically clear that it must occur.

places cities. Even if we do not embrace the idea that cities follow an inevitable trajectory from birth to death, we can still see that compromise of any of these essential functions suggests a high level of morbidity. I would suggest that when many vital functions fail, morbidity levels are lethal. What remains—perhaps a reserve population of people who cannot or will not leave—is not so much a city as a concentration of people living in a situation of minimal community structure, skeletal or nonexistent public services, high levels of dependency on outside public and nonprofit social providers, and depressed or nonexistent economic activity. In other words, the closest analogue to a dying or dead city is a refugee camp. The key, then, is to identify critical urban life functions and assess their health in any given city.

We can posit three crucial urban life functions that transform high concentrations of people into viable cities. These urban functions are governance, economic stewardship, and cultural production and preservation. We can distinguish smaller organized communities (towns, villages) from cities by the increasingly complex character of each of these functions in larger places.³

GOVERNANCE

In general, governance involves the exercise of public authority within a particular territory. The creation of a municipal corporation, a legal construct, is the first step in establishing a city's governance powers. In particular, these involve in the first instance the management of budgetary matters involving taxation, spending, and borrowing. Although cities in virtually every society are dependent on higher levels of government for some of their revenues, cities also typically raise own-source monies and borrow money in their own names. Furthermore, local officials generally play a leading role in allocating those revenues for a wide variety of public services and purposes.

A second crucial element in the governance function is the maintenance of public safety. Modern cities in America and Europe date the establishment of police and fire services to nineteenth century developments, but this is an ancient function: older cities fulfilled public safety responsibilities by building and manning walls and employing night watchmen.

A third component of the governance function is the control of public and private space in the public interest. This is inherent in the zoning power, in the establishment of public parks and squares, and in fostering or enabling real estate development projects. This latter set of activities overlaps with local economic stewardship.

3. This sort of argument recalls Louis Wirth's famous "Urbanism as a Way of Life" (1938), in which he argued that urban places are distinguished from other sizes and types of human settlements by certain social and demographic characteristics, such as size, density, social heterogeneity, institutional complexity and specialization, and reliance on formal rules, each of which vary along a continuum.

ECONOMIC STEWARDSHIP

Although some ancient cities were first established as settlements around holy places and others were created deliberately for administrative purposes (including some in the modern age⁴), the preponderance of cities were first founded for economic reasons.⁵ Settlements were located on trading routes or at transportation crossroads or near valuable resources or because they served as central markets for the hinterlands. The earliest functions of most American cities in their infancy was literally to own and manage the markets, regulating wages and prices, maintaining public docks and the off-loading process, and guaranteeing fair weights and measures (Teaford, 1975).

The economic stewardship function of modern cities has at least three principal components: the city acts to host and encourage densely concentrated economic activities; it serves as a market to match labor and employers; and it fosters, enables, and regulates most real estate development investment by private actors. Vibrant cities are those that play an active role—as initiators of development, as brokers, as enablers—in shaping and growing their local economies.

To speak of a dense concentration of economic activities is in the first instance to capture the city's role in hosting and building economic agglomerations, that is, the clustering of mutually supportive, complementary businesses or nonprofit employers. Business incubators and industry-targeted tax incentives are examples. In the second instance, it is to make reference to classical location theory, the notion that cities that thrive are those that minimize the cost of production factors (raw materials, labor, capital) while maximizing access to export markets. This is largely a function of location on favorable transport routes, but cities can create location advantages by investment in transportation infrastructure.

The healthy city is not merely a passive actor in maintaining its function as a labor market. Cities actively seek investment by business and nonprofit employers precisely, in part, to create jobs for their residents and in-migrants. Successful cities may also pursue policies that attract and retain skilled workers, including encouraging affordable housing, providing good schools, and fostering an array of consumption amenities.

Finally, economic stewardship involves an active role in economic development, including zoning, strategic and city planning, financing, and infrastructure. Cities play the public role in public-private development partnerships, ideally guiding, regulating, leavening but also enabling private ambition.

4. Brasilia comes to mind.

5. On the religious origins of ancient cities, see Mumford (1961).

CULTURAL PRODUCTION AND PRESERVATION

Large, diverse populations create a market of sufficient scale to support cultural institutions such as museums, theaters, orchestras, libraries, publishers, news media, and galleries. The presence of these institutions and their patrons, combined with the personal freedom that comes with urban life, attract cultural producers: artists, musicians, writers, performers, curators, and so on, and their presence in turn attracts other cultural producers seeking the benefits that derive from numbers: mutual stimulation, competition, access to supportive services.

Again, vibrant cities are not passive bystanders in the creation of active cultural institutions. The revitalization of Times Square theaters in New York City, the creation of the Houston arts district, and the construction of major new public libraries designed as architectural showcases in cities from Seattle to Albuquerque to Madison are examples of cultural development led by municipal action.

ASSESSING THE VITALITY OF CRITICAL URBAN LIFE FUNCTIONS

Each of the urban life functions can be assessed for morbidity, some by the application of clear metrics, others by less systematic means. Both methods are familiar to medical diagnosticians. Each element of each separate function represents a spectrum of values, and there are few points, save at the polar ends of the spectrum, at which one can determine with certainty the life prospects of a city. Nevertheless, a composite assessment can offer a well-supported judgment about whether a city is dying or not. The moment of death, as with human beings, remains unknowable.

Consider, for purposes of illustration, the case of Detroit, the most prominent example of a dying city. The city scores low on most indicators of governance vitality. Detroit was placed in the hands of an outside receiver appointed by the state governor in 2013, and it declared bankruptcy shortly thereafter. This means that it had lost its fundamental ability to govern itself: no locally elected official had budget or borrowing authority, nor was there any formal power in city hall to carry out the business of the city except for those granted by the externally appointed emergency manager. At the most basic level, then, Detroit was no longer an autonomous municipal corporation.

Detroit scores poorly on other indicators of governance capacity. Its ability to provide for public safety, as measured by crime rates and by police, fire department and emergency medical services response times rank the city as a highly dysfunctional outlier compared to others of its size (City of Detroit, 2013). Another element of the governance function is the management of space. The city nearly closed half its public parks before private philanthropy

forestalled this drastic step; it has a stock of tens of thousands of abandoned buildings that it cannot tear down or sell and that then become targets for drug dealers, thieves, and arsonists. When the city does manage to demolish such buildings, it must manage huge tracts of open space that stress its ability to provide police and fire protection, sidewalk and road maintenance, and street lighting. Efforts to consolidate neighborhoods by persuading isolated remaining residents to move to denser areas have failed. The city cannot manage its territory.

An examination of the city's economic stewardship function indicates an equally high level of morbidity. Detroit long ago lost its comparative advantage as a center of automobile manufacturing, and it has not replaced the manufacturing jobs that have been leaving the city over the last half century. The sheer number of jobs lost, the low ratio of remaining jobs to population, and the declining proportion of all metropolitan jobs still located in the city all offer hard metrics of the city's moribund labor market.

Although there has been recent downtown investment in software, medical insurance processing, and financial businesses, the jobs created or relocated have not replaced the lost jobs in numbers nor have they absorbed the displaced industrial workers or other unemployed residents. A smaller proportion of Detroit residents are college graduates than in any other large city in the United States. Not surprisingly, then, many of the new jobs are filled by suburban commuters. Detroit is no longer a vibrant labor market, nor does it play a distinctive economic role in the regional or national economy. In a sense it has lost its economic reason for being.

Another measure of a city's economic stewardship function is its ability to help shape the local economy, including business investment patterns and real estate development. New York City's aggressive efforts under Mayor Michael Bloomberg to build a high tech engineering campus and its rezoning of nearly 40% of the city's underused light industrial land and abandoned waterfront neighborhoods for housing and commercial development are prime examples of vibrant economic stewardship. By contrast, a few wealthy entrepreneurs have treated Detroit as a blank canvas on which they have pursued development projects without reference to any city plan or public priorities.

Although Detroit advertises itself as having the second largest theater district in the nation, its role in cultural production and preservation has been deeply compromised by the well-publicized struggle to save the art in the Detroit Institute of Art from sale to pay off the city's creditors. Unlike the contents of most museums, much of the great art in the DIA was purchased by the city in its more prosperous days. Like other municipal assets it was potentially liable to liquidation to satisfy retirement pension and bond obligations.

It is true that small clusters of young artists, attracted by extraordinarily cheap real estate and the pathos and exoticism of the city's dramatic industrial ruins, have settled in the city in recent years, but their role in the cultural economy and life of the region and nation is marginal. The nation's largest museum devoted to black history is located in Detroit and its building is owned by the city, but the institution has been in financial difficulty from its inception. It has survived only because the city subsidized half its operating expenses, but when the city declared bankruptcy it reduced its subsidy by half, jeopardizing the survival prospects of the museum.

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF A DYING CITY?

By most indicators the vital life functions of Detroit are failing. The city no longer functions as an effective municipal corporation, nor is it a magnet for people seeking economic advantage, either in the form of employment or investment returns. It has no resources and little authority to play a proactive role in its own economic development plans. Cultural institutions that rely on city support face a bleak future. Scenarios for the city's return to prosperity lack plausibility. Detroit is not unique; it is simply the largest of the country's dying cities.

But theorizing the urban dying process and theorizing the endstate of urban death are two different matters. Unlike with the death of humans, the dying cities of modern societies are not on the brink of vanishing. People remain, some by virtue of habit or preference, others because they have nowhere else to go nor means to settle elsewhere. A city in this condition is fit for hospice, a situation in which it must be cared for by others. The appointment of a receiver with sovereign powers is a first step in this direction. The reassignment of local municipal responsibilities to regional authorities or to state, county or private providers is another step, one taken already in several instances in Detroit.⁶ Private voluntary initiatives—neighborhood safety watches, car pooling cooperatives in the absence of public transportation, guerilla urban gardens in vacant city lots—take over what were once municipal functions. Opportunistic investors may find the inexpensive real estate too cheap to resist, sparking pockets of economic activity in an otherwise moribund environment and playing out personal schemes of regeneration.

At this point, then, we can begin to understand the process of dying. We can understand the loss of municipal authority and the withering of economic functions. But the dying cities of the United States are not Pompeii or Carthage; they have not been extinguished. We do not know whether a dying

6. The state legislature established a Regional Convention Authority in 2009 and a (limited) Regional Transit Authority in 2012.

city's catastrophic population loss will level out, stabilizing at some reserve population, or whether over time the city will eventually fully empty out. We have a theoretical framework to understand dying, but the theory of the final stage, the mystery of death, eludes us.

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