

WHERE DID ALL THE METROPOLITANITES GO?

by

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Discussion Paper

on

Rebecca Robertson's

URBAN SETTLEMENT PATTERNS IN THE NORTH AMERICAN METROPOLIS

The Thirteenth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences
Washington, D.C. September 2-5, 1984

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Rebecca Robertson:

Urban Settlement Patterns in the North American Metropolis.

Ms. Robertson's paper presents an excellent summary of the historical development of the North American Metropolis, followed by a closely reasoned scenario of its probable future and thoughtful proposals for future policies, based on a realistic evaluation of the limited role of planning in North America. Because the paper is so good, I do not have the time to summarize all the points with which I agree, and will discuss only the others.

First, two picayune remarks:

First: There are two apparent lapses in wording; 1) on page 7, line 8, "centrifugal" should read "centripetal", 2) on page 18, line 10, "decades" should read "years". Second: as a stickler for language, I object to the widely used term "present trends". One only can observe trends in the past or project them into the future. Objectively, there is no present.

A more significant shortcoming, to be attributed less to Ms. Robertson than to her sources, is the excessive reliance on the census distinction between "central cities" and "suburbs" within S.M.A.'s and between "metropolitan" and "non-metropolitan" counties on the national scale. I have explained in my paper entitled "Have the secular trends of population distribution been reversed?" why I consider my concept of "Metropolitan Regions", or "Orbits", or "Urban Fields" better suited to answer this question. As for the distinction between central cities and suburbs, it has little meaning given the fact that in the U.S. the central city's share of S.M.A. population varies for 20 to 99%.

Nor is the often quoted fact that many "non-metropolitan" and "not--adjacent" counties have grown at above average rate between 1970 and 1980 conclusive. Such growth has also occurred in the preceding decades of unquestioned metropolitan concentration; albeit to a lesser extent.

I believe that the development of the pattern of human settlements since the emergence of towns can be understood in terms of Ebenezer Howard's two magnets', urban and rural. Howard did not fully spell out why these magnets attract; the first by providing access to other human beings, the second to extra-human nature. In both cases the object of attraction is sought both as resource and as environment.

As technical progress has reduced the number of workers required for on-site work to use nature as a resource to 3 - 4% of the labour force, the balance has tended to agglomerations where they could use each other, increasingly specialized skills as a resource, the more effectively the greater the number and variety of skills accessible to each other. Also, the greater the number of human beings accessible to each other, the greater the chance to meet those which each individual might enjoy as environment.

Hence the centripetal trend to larger and larger agglomerations, which gained speed with the Industrial Revolution well over two centuries ago and is still gathering momentum in most areas of the world, while in the most "developed" regions it has almost run its course.

But while the rural magnet as resource has lost much of its power, as environment its attraction is as powerfull as ever, if not more so. The rich and powerful have always had their country villas. The mass of the urban population could not follow them, because they could not move far from their work, as long as persons could move only on foot, or at best on hoof.

This changed when technical progress provided faster means for the movement of persons, goods, and messages. The change started with the steam railroad which created the "railroad suburbs" of the wealthy, and of horse-drawn busses and street cars which created the "inner suburbs" of the middle class. It gathered momentum toward the end of the 19th centruy with the bicycle, electric traction, and the telephone. It was further accelerated by the motor vehicle and by wireless communication. As a result the time required to move a given distance has been reduced ten to one for persons and goods, and from ten to zero for messages. As a consequence human beings can maintain access to their fellows, both as resource and as environment, while gaining access to the rural environment; or at least to its most important attractions, space and vegetation.

Hence the second, centrifugal trend from city center to periphery which started more than a hundred years ago. The centrifugal trend can be observed all over the world. In the Northeastern United States, as in West-Central Europe and in Japan, it has completely overflowed the centripetal one. In these regions practically everybody lives within the orbit of one or

another metropolis. Ms. Robertson refers to these two opposing trends, but does not always clearly distinguish the different scales at which they operate.

She starts her discussion by referring to Melvin Webber's paper on "Community without Propinquity". This significant paper overstates its case. A-spatial communities have always existed; their existence in no way precludes the existence of definite patterns of human settlements.

In connection with Webber's paper, Ms. Robertson refers to "increasing foot-looseness of jobs and population". Jobs certainly are becoming more footloose. However data from several developed countries, both "West" and "East", indicate that internal population migration has actually decreased.

I emphatically agree with Ms. Robertson's statement that planning policies should "accommodate the new order"--accommodate, not change. Certainly Albert Mayer's statement "trend is not Destiny" is true; but neither is trend just a line on a graph. It is the net result of contradictory actions of many human beings undertaken to satisfy their aspirations. It can be changes only by devising means to satisfy these aspirations equally well, or better - which is difficult, or to change the aspirations - which is even more difficult.

I have only a few minor additions to Ms. Robertson's presentation of historical development. The peak of urban growth in the 1920's was due to massive internal migration in addition to the factors mentioned (p.2). Some heavy industries developed early at the urban periphery along rail lines; their workers

mostly lived nearby. (p.5)

I have more questions on Ms. Robertson's treatment of the 1970-1980 period, misnamed "The Present".

Industries have become "indifferent" to location of raw materials, but are more dependent than ever to access to business services, including major airports. (p.8) The decrease in average household size is not new, but has been going on for 100 years. The main reason for the precipitate drop of the fertility rate is the coincidence of the long-term increase of women working outside their home with fear of the future resulting from the (probably) cyclical downturn of the economy. "Gentrification" (p. 13) does not mean "return" to the cities. Most of the people who "up-grade" old houses have previously lived in the city. By replacing poorer and larger households, gentrification accelerates the population loss of the central city but improved its financial condition.

Increase in office space does not necessarily mean an increase in office employment, because per head absorption of office space is also increasing. Some office construction is occurring in inner suburbs, generally in those of high socio-economic status.

When it comes to the future, two very different scenarios can be developed, dependent on two different anticipations of the future of the economy. It may be that late Corporate Capitalism has entered a period of permanent stagnation, with only short minor cycles. It may be that capitalism has retained its historic resilience and will produce another period of strong

growth. Ms. Robertson bases her prediction on the second hypothesis, anticipating continuing growth of G.N.P. per head. She enumerates a number of factors working for "concentration and density", and of opposing ones working for "footlessness". Both concentration and footlessness have very different effects if they work on a national or on a metropolitan scale. Concentration induces density only on the metropolitan scale.

As for the enumerated concentrating factors I know of no evidence that preference for face-to-face social contact is increasing; it seems to be a constant. It is income rather than population which has to reach a critical mass to support consumer services and, more important, business services. "Increased housing and land cost". Their recent increase was entirely due to demand pull and is already beginning to be reversed. "Rising energy costs". These are more likely to resume their secular falling trend; for oil this is already happening.

Ms. Robertson's last point is an elaboration of her first one. As for the factors favouring footlessness: "Knowledge" industries may require more rather than less face-to-face contact than those making commodities. "Disadvantages of central city" are relevant on metropolitan, not on national scale.

As to the conclusions, I agree that "a major revival of central cities"(are they really dead?) is unlikely. I also agree that "dispersion" on a national scale(different from a shift to South and West) is improbable. However, "decentralization" on the metropolitan scale will probably continue and even

accelerate. It has most vigorously proceeded during the seventies, when all the concentrating factors enumerated by Ms. Robertson, including the two which I expect to be reversed, were fully operative. This is proof of the strength of the rural magnet. Contrary to Ms. Robertson's assertion, the growth rate in the metropolitan fringe has been higher for rural than for urban areas.

However, the radius from the metropolitan center within which decentralization occurs, is likely to be no more than 100 kilometers, maybe 120. Small communities beyond this distance are likely to lose population, except those that can offer environmental attractions, primarily climate and scenery.

Branch plants, if they are to be efficient and innovative, require easy access to face-to-face communication, to highly specialized business services, as well as to major airports, both to be found only in the metropolis.

I was puzzled by the last paragraph on p.21. It starts by offering as the "most likely scenario" "centers that offer work, living, and recreation in close proximity" and ends by predicting "proximate interdependencies".

Ms. Robertson's remark that planning is at odds with U.S. "values" is true. However, planning reflects political reality not only in contemporary North America, but always and everywhere.

Population decline and decay are not the same. Where large-scale gentrification occurs, population decline means "upgrading". Both population decline and decay may be a greater threat to small towns than to big cities.

The development of "secondary" centers should be encouraged within as well as outside metropolitan areas, and of newer as well as of older areas. Yes, planners should be competent and humane. So should be everybody else. Amen.