

# Why Cities?



Cities, at their most exciting, are places where the whole world exists in miniature; where all the latest ideas, art objects and fashion trends are present to be witnessed; where life's stream runs rich.

At their worst, cities feed on us and give back mainly the stresses of congestion and repetition—often the repetition of things whose originals were none too exciting to begin with. In cities of this sort, people take on the monotony of their surroundings, thumping cash registers and computer keyboards at amazing speed, but seem incapable of speech.

Money is probably the most significant reason for the existence of cities. Historically, they popped up where trading routes intersected, in places where trade caravans could find water and salt. In our part of the world, towns and cities either had a trading significance (e.g., Fort Edmonton) or, after the federal government put the CPR in charge, were evenly spaced to coincide with a steam train's need to take on water and a CPR land speculator's need to

take on money (e.g., Calgary).

But what about today? Why are modern cities where they are? Or is *where* even the point any more? Has the question moved on to *why*?

The historical reasons why Calgary and Edmonton exist are easy enough to look up, nor does it matter much if those historical reasons have shifted or gone away. By the 1920s, both places had achieved the size that makes a city impossible to move and difficult to kill. A city will grow just because it has grown.

As they enlarge, cities exert a force that causes the towns within reasonable commuting distance to swell, mostly filling with people who do not work there. This is unsettling for the towns, even denaturing, but it also keeps them alive—something that

can't be said for all towns beyond the city's gravitational effect. Small towns more than 90 minutes drive from a city are usually locked in a struggle to avoid shrinking or dying. Just to maintain the size of a small town requires incredible ingenuity on the part of its citizens, or incredible desperation. "Bring us your toxic waste," a small-town mayor I know once said—in jest, sort of.

The fact that cities are growing while small towns get smaller can give the impression that living in a city is humanity's inevitable fate. Like corporations of other kinds, cities are predestined to devour or destroy the smaller entity. But is this true and inevitable, or is it a state of affairs that develops because we agree to believe it can't be avoided? Frankly, when I consider how much of my gross domestic product goes toward the Internet, e-mail, cell phones, and the dozen other costly devices I have for no other reason than keeping me in potential instant short or long-range contact with every other human being on the planet, I find it hard to remember why I also need to live within speaking distance of

anyone. What I'm getting at is that the city may in fact have become a "convention" rather than a necessity. Or put another way, cities may already be nothing more than a widespread bad habit and something that future generations will laugh at.

If you ask a downtown office-worker, especially a member of the downtown management class, why there needs to be a downtown office where everyone congregates more or less simultaneously every weekday, you can count on hearing about the value of face-to-face communication, the magical synergy achieved by humans when they stand in front of one another, meeting, talking, "brainstorming." It is almost as if the burnt umber colour of the downtown skyline is not the result of car exhaust at all but ash from so many brilliantly igniting ideas, the aura of creativity itself.

But what, in dollars and cents, is the value of face-to-face communication? Does it exceed the cost of erecting office towers and building

freeways; the cost of the environmental and health problems brought on by car exhaust; the cost of C-trains and subways to try and reduce those environmental and health costs; the social and health costs associated with people going berserk in traffic and smashing their cars into other cars that annoyed them?

"She cut me off."

"He was going less than the speed limit so I had to kill him."

That is, if it is only synergy and the creative surge from a good old fashioned brainstorm brought on by human nearness that justifies the city and its downtown core, couldn't we provide courses to teach people to feel the same creative excitement in response to a live video image? Maybe while looking at the screen, they could punch a blow-up doll in the arm.

"Good idea, pal. That one's a winner!"

If we could somehow unleash ourselves from the obligation of building

downtowns to accommodate the daily sucking inward and the mighty four o'clock blowing outward of half a million people, I personally think that would be worth investigation. On the subject of money alone, the original *raison d'être* of the city, the evidence in favour of abandoning the city is particularly compelling. While crowding and crowding ever more densely onto the same patch of urban ground has shot the price of a city lot to \$80,000, you can go to many places in rural Saskatchewan and Manitoba and buy an entire quarter-section for the same amount. That's one thousand times as much of the planet's surface, according to my crude math.

If the response to all this is that we would lose the cosmopolitanism of city life, the shopping and entertainment options, the chi-chi galleries and the foo-foo dogs, it strikes me that we might not have to lose anything. For example, if we simply fanned out randomly, the many small towns we would enlarge or cause to be created should by logical inference be as cosmopolitan as the cities we left. As for shopping, the only place that has unlimited shopping possibilities isn't Calgary, Toronto, or for that matter New York or Paris; it is the internet.

All in all, cities, especially those of the repeating decimal, franchise and suburb variety, probably aren't worth it any more. Given that technology has eclipsed the need for them, and that a whole lot of lovely places in the country are fast becoming uninhabited, I really have to wonder what's keeping us. If the homesteaders of yesteryear are somewhere watching, it must be ironic to see their descendants jammed into cities, just the way they were before they broke free and ran for the free land of the Canadian prairie and parkland.

"Where do you live?" a future reader of this column just asked me.

On the edge of a city of one million, in a state of ambivalence and denial.

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