The future of the city: a geography of connection and disconnection

The future of the city concerns us all. Our world continues to urbanise: by 2020, 53% of the population will be urban and most will live in megacities (≥10m), especially in the developing world (Habitat 2001). And with global integration, cities are increasingly important places, acting as strategic nodes through which flows of information, money, commodities, and people pass, mediated by information and communication technologies or ICTs.

Global integration changes how we understand urban places so first we must be clear on what we mean by ‘the city’. We used to think of cities as dense concentrations of economic and social activities and people, set within clear urban boundaries. But globalisation has transformed cities, creating flows that move across city boundaries. Can we really imagine such a boundary when businesses are linked into flows of capital, information, goods and people that circulate at a scale much wider than the urban? When urban residents maintain connections with relatives and friends scattered across the globe? When urban communities are made up not just of neighbours but electronically-based communities of interest? Can we really think of the city in the future as a coherent unit within boundaries?

Most geographers now suggest not. Globalisation has made all our cities into sites of transnational connections. Networks of connections flow across and between cities, linking places within the city to a range of locales both near and far: linking a corporate office to corporate headquarters, a neighbourhood environmental group to similar organisations in other cities and countries, an individual migrant to relatives in their country of origin. Cities’ patterns of landuse and social geography, once envisaged as a neat pattern of concentric zones radiating from a city centre, are slowly being remoulded by these networks (see Figure 1). One thing is clear: we cannot think about the city in isolation. We need to think in terms of its relation to other places. Connection—and disconnection—will be a crucial factor shaping the future of the city.

But cities are not all dynamic flow and movement. They are very real places, shaped by the interplay between the city as a distinctive settled place and its role as a hub through which networks of near and far connection pass and are localised in the city’s landscapes, buildings, wiring, social relations and daily practices. Let’s look at what this interplay creates in contemporary cities and about how it might shape the city future.

ICTs and a new urban hierarchy of fast and slow spaces? Not all cities are equally connected. Cities with diverse economies, multicultural populations and intense concentrations of ICTs are more densely connected than, for instance, regional manufacturing cities or indeed many cities of the developing world. This pattern of uneven connection is shaping an urban system represented by a hub and spoke model (see Figure 2) where hubs are immense concentrations of capital, skills, knowledge and technologies, densely connected to each other by spokes—‘tunnels’ of transnational and inter-city flows. Other cities, though they may be physically close to hubs, are bypassed, excluding them from access to these networks (see Figure 3).

Figure 1: Patsy Healey’s vision of contemporary city form: from a unicentred to a multiplex city of interconnected nodes


Figure 2: The hub and spoke model: networks of connection between valued territories by-passing proximate but less-valued territories

future, uneven development of this system is likely to be intensified by hub and spoke urbanisation. We should note though that a list of hub cities would now include Hong Kong, Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires, Mumbai, Mexico City and Bangkok. The connections are cutting across the older division between the cities of the developed and developing world, rewriting the geography of the urban system.

Globalisation means that cities compete with each other to be positioned favourably as hubs at the heart of important inter-city connections—usually these are economic networks of financial markets, global commodity production and distribution. This often means vast public investment in major infrastructure projects (see Box 1). We can expect a proliferation of similar projects as cities continue to seek connection in the global urban hierarchy. In the developing world especially, this raises important questions about equity, as scarce public resources are poured into specialist, costly infrastructure projects, the benefits of which are unevenly distributed, while public infrastructure, such as health and education, are neglected.

Connection and disconnection within the city

The hub and spoke model can be applied within cities too. Just as there are fast and slow spaces in the global urban hierarchy so there are fast and slow spaces within the city. Cities are dense networks of interaction in which some parts of the city and some social groups are more densely and powerfully-connected than others: compare Sydney’s CBD and the low-income suburb of Mount Druitt or a software engineer in Bangalore (India) and a shanty town dweller on the city’s edge. And some networks are more powerful, influential and bring more immediate advantage than others: compare the networks exchanging financial information between London’s and Sydney’s financial markets and those exchanging information between Sydney’s and San Francisco’s gay and lesbian organisations. Although cities have always been unevenly developed, the uneven pattern of connection and disconnection is likely to exacerbate this in future.

Apart from increased polarisation between urban income groups, geographers are identifying segregation or ‘unbundling’ of urban social groups according to socio-economic characteristics and the services, infrastructure and urban spaces they can access. Knox (1993) sees urban populations as a series of segregated lifestyle communities ranging from groups with dense connections to economic flows and information, and access to the most advanced ICTs, to those without connections and with only the most basic access to ICTs and the beneficial information they transmit.

How is this pattern of (dis)connection likely to intersect with the urban landscape in the future? Already, intense social segregation is reflected in increasingly ‘spatially partitioned and compartmentalised cities’ (Badcock 1997, p. 256): the development of urban space as a series of fragmented, private enclaves differentiating social groups from each other by physical and virtual barriers. Will we see urban landscapes increasingly socially fragmented into packaged, privatised enclaves; business parks, shopping and entertainment complexes, theme parks and residential enclaves of high security gated suburbs? (see Box 2).

These developments erode the city’s public spaces where social groups might interact and encounter diverse social identities. More and more city spaces may be relocated inside privatised places, seceding from the city’s public space. Already libraries, university campuses, e.g. the University of California campus at CityWalk, community centres and sports facilities are to be found in malls or removed from the street in private/mixed-use developments. In these places, access is more easily controlled via security systems and CCTV surveillance can identify for removal marginalised (disconnected) socio-economic groups (like the homeless), those thought to be the wrong age, gender or ethnicity (like groups of young people in city malls). An increasingly common ‘urban fortress’ architecture has the potential to entrench existing social segregation and power relations and to create a ‘bubble effect’ whereby wealthier urban residents can disconnect themselves from encounters with ‘undesirable’ landscapes or social groups by retreating to work, live and shop in secureified, privatised urban enclaves where good quality services are supplied privately (e.g. schools, medical centres and community services) and, crucially, so is dedicated highspeed ICT infrastructure.

ICTs may contribute to a future of intensifying segregation and inequality. ICT investment is already highly concentrated in urban hotspots. By mid-1999 about 86 per cent of all broadband internet delivery capacity in the US was concentrated in the prosperous suburbs and business areas of the 20 largest cities (Habitat 2001, p. 9). Private ICT suppliers see urban enclaves as lucrative markets and are likely to use sophisticated geodemographic information to identify spatial concentrations of consumers for customised broadband network connections, smart home technologies, and even tolled smart highways accessible only to those whose cars are equipped with electronic transponders, like Melbourne’s Citylink linking affluent suburbs with the CBD and airport. This ‘cherry picking’ of wealthy hotspots may leave other urban spaces underserved, poorly connected and allowed to decay. They are increasingly the less connected places of the city for less connected people for whom economic opportunity is more limited. Uneven connectivity to urban ICT services may have long-term future social impacts (Habitat 2001, p. 9). Extremes of these developments are to be found in the major cities of the south. For instance, Sao Paulo’s affluent, ICT-rich, gated residential clusters, patrolled by armed guards, linked by helicopter and sealed off from the favelas of the poor where residents struggle to access a telephone. In the cities of the north, contrasts and segregation are less intense (see Box 3). Nonetheless, the spectre of intensifying segregation and
inequality haunts our city future. Growing segregation and inequality will nurture fear of difference and intolerance, degrade a sense of common urban citizenship and encourage further segregation, led by the retreat of the rich to secure enclaves.

Currents of hope: how might the future of the city be different?

The discussion above suggests a dystopian future of growing inequality and intensely segregated urban landscapes marked by patterns of connection and disconnection. But what are the present currents that offer hope of a different future?

Urban social movements

Clearly there is entrenched inequality in access to the multiple connections ICTs offer but we must remember that ICTs can be used in multiple ways. We have concentrated on how ICTs serve economic connections, forgetting that they are also used by politically-active urban social movements (USMs) to build connections, gather information and advice from transnational networks of similar groups, and to help organise and lobby for better services, more sustainable urban policies, and recognition of the rights of minorities and the marginalised. Various USMs have used transnational connections to organise locally, in individual cities, to fight for safer urban streets—for example, Reclaim the Night marches; for the rights of minorities—for example, to build places of worship for ethnic minorities; for more sustainable urban policies—environmentalists lobbying for better urban public transport; and for more affordable housing—housing activists organising into housing co-operatives. These groups build connections within and across the city to empower themselves in reshaping the future of their cities with greater equity, cultural recognition and sustainability in mind.

More democratic urban governance and planning

The influence of USMs has been expanded by the growing democratisation of urban governments—local councils and state governments. Cities are taking growing responsibility for their own economic development and promoting themselves in inter-urban competitions to attract flows of investment and tourists. To achieve this, urban governments increasingly work in partnerships with the private sector and community groups, to draw on their resources and ideas to implement projects and policies to direct city development. On the one hand this has led city governments to concentrate on projects which encourage economic growth and absorb government budgets, like Malaysia's MSC strategy, and which downplay social policies and their public funding, e.g. public education or housing. But on the other hand, this has led to greater community consultation and participation in urban decision making.

So we can expect a more lively urban activism, encouraged by USMs, where communities demand to be involved in urban government, particularly in urban planning. Urban planning projects, such as the development of new roads or major new housing developments, rather than being presented to communities by urban planners, are already incorporating more negotiation between a wide range of interested stakeholders to help shape the direction of the project. This consultative approach will become widespread as it is accepted as being better able to bring together the vast mix of interests and individuals in any urban neighbourhood—business interests, environmentalists, ethnic groups, young gentrifiers, older long-time residents. But it is not easy to find a common view for how an urban place should be developed to meet the conflicting claims and needs of local stakeholders. Consider for instance the different views likely to be held by developers and environmentalists, or by disadvantaged urban youth and older residents. How is commonly to be found between wealthy residents of Sydney's north shore who resist further development of their neighbourhoods and environmentalists who campaign for in-filling these neighbourhoods with medium density development? And how can it be ensured that the views of marginalised groups, such as non-English speaking residents, will be heard above those of urban elites, e.g. development interests? Future city planning is bound to involve healthy doses of political struggle but expanded public participation and inter-city connections between groups with similar agendas has the potential to make this a more democratic process.

More environmentally sustainable cities?

Cities are enormous concentrations of population, production and movement. They are unable to be self-sufficient, to generate their own food and energy supplies or manage their own waste. They create an enormous ecological footprint—the land area required to provide their food, water, energy and waste disposal. Sydney's ecological footprint is estimated at 37 times the size of its land area (EPA 1997)! Massive transformations in urban settlement patterns, transportation and consumption habits would be necessary for cities to become sustainable. Technology, like energy efficient heating systems, may produce future reductions in urban environmental damage. But the integration of ICTs into the urban fabric is producing greater urban concentration and an increasing propensity to move around urban places rather than the expected reduction in travel and dissolution of urban concentration.

In the cities of the north, consumption practices and urban lifestyle

Box 3: Rebounding the city within enclaves: Jackson's Landing, Sydney

The AS15b Jacksons Landing development—the largest urban regeneration project ever undertaken in Australia—has transformed a 146-year-old, 12-hectare industrial property on Sydney Harbour into a fully integrated residential, commercial and retail development. Its 1,500 apartments and terraced housing are interspersed with cafes, retail facilities, restaurants, and a commercial precinct. Jackson's Landing is argued by its developers to be a 'true community with a range of housing, services and communities that enhance lifestyle'.

The development reproduces or 'rebounds' the traditional city, bringing together mixed functions, intersecting land uses and urban streetlife within a largescale packaged development. But is this 'the real city' or a substitute for the city where only the like-minded and those in a similar income bracket are likely to encounter each other? Jacksons Landing is not a gated community. While individual buildings have their own restricted access, surveillance systems and security systems, non-residents can still circulate through the neighbourhood. Nonetheless, it is a cocooned and affluent urban space.

Located at the end of a now largely high-income peninsula in inner Sydney, apartment prices start at close to half a million AS and most of the formerly working class population have been displaced by rising house prices and replaced by wealthier, younger inner city workers or cash-rich 'empty nesters'. The peninsula also contains a concentration of information and media industries where some residents work, and many others work in finance and producer service industries in the CBD. These are high-income, generally well-educated residents and connected individuals living in a city 'hotspot': an exclusive, prestige and highly connected quarter of the inner Sydney.

expectations that inflict environmental damage, like resisting public transport use or demanding exotic fruits all year around, will be difficult to transform and continue to inflict enormous environmental damage. For the vast urban populations in cities of the south, survival is often a more pressing concern than sustainability. The sheer size of these cities problematises sustainability. And if greater economic development is achieved and living standards are improved, we may see the adoption of environmentally-damaging consumption habits characteristic of the north. So where does hope lie in the future for urban sustainability? At best, more sustainable cities may be achievable but urban sustainability is likely to remain out of reach. Hope lies in the global politics of environmentalism and its localisation in grassroots action by environmentalist USMs who fight for urban policies that minimise urban environmental damage, promote urban public transport systems and promote urban consolidation.

Conclusion
What do you see when you think of the urban future? New technologies alleviating urban poverty and inequality and enabling sustainability? Or growing polarisation and inequity within and between cities, increased segregation, worsening environmental decay, growing crime, intolerance and surveillance? Before you decide, remember that globalisation and ICTs are not producing a common urban future. Broad global trends and common urban forms are emerging but the future for each city will depend on how these trends are localised: how ICTs are used within the city and what connections are built through them, what efforts are made by governments and USMs to disrupt the geography of fast and slow, connected and disconnected spaces, how public policies which redistribute the economic benefits of capitalism, e.g. taxation, urban planning and social welfare, are used to modify inequality and segregation, what sort of common agendas can be found in increasingly diverse and fragmented urban society.

In a globalised world, connection for cities and for the varied populations within them is a crucial factor. Globally, the challenge is to ensure that ‘slow spaces’ are not locked out of these networks and left without the resources to create better urban conditions. Locally, the challenge is to ensure that segregation of the connected and the disconnected is limited and not allowed to exacerbate urban inequalities or challenge the city’s quality as a tolerant place of intense social mixture and coexistence between diverse groups.

References

Glossary—define the following terms:
- megacities, nodes, commodities, capital, transnational, hierarchy, infrastructure, segregation, enclaves, USM, marginalised groups, urban elites, ecological footprint.

Understanding the text
1. In what ways are cities acting as strategic nodes?
2. What is global integration?
3. Why does the author suggest that cities are now less isolated?
4. What is a digitised flow of money?
5. Explain the ways in which some cities are more powerful and influential than others.
6. Explain why the spaces within cities are so different from each other.
7. What is the ‘bubble effect’ in cities as described by the author?
8. Describe some examples of the ways in which already wealthy and powerful areas of cities are made more powerful.
9. Give some examples of the growing segregation of parts of cities into rich and poor spaces.
10. Identify some local ‘urban social movements’ that can be considered international.
11. How has democratic decision-making in cities increased?
12. In what ways do cities create an enormous ecological footprint?
13. What are some of the differences between problems produced by cities of the north (developed nations) and the south (less developed nations)?

Skills
1. Study Figure 1. Describe in your own words what the arrows and the different regions shaded in this map are telling you about the way a city operates.
2. Study Figure 2. Use the article to help explain in your own words the model shown.

Discussion and debate
1. From your knowledge of cities, suggest some examples of cities in the world which would be likely to be ‘hubs’ and others that would be likely to be bypassed by many of the important connections.
2. Using your knowledge of the inside patterns within any one city, suggest some of the ‘fast’ and the ‘slow’ spaces within the city. The fast spaces would be those dominated by powerful people, big business, government, etc. The slow spaces would be those where the people have much less power over their own future.
3. The author says that the picture she presents is a ‘dystopic future’. Dystopia in this sense is the opposite to the ideal or utopian view of things. Try to imagine a utopian view of cities in the future where things are better than now. Discuss what you would aim to achieve, and then brainstorm ways that cities could change to include these.
4. Think of a local problem near you or your school, e.g. traffic, recreation places, litter and/or access to facilities. In what ways could a solution to this problem be developed by consultation between local people and the local council? What suggestions could you make to the council about the problem?
5. Read the description of CityWalk USA in Box 2. Discuss the pros and cons of such a centre. Do you think that the set of rules controlling access are a good idea?