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71 Urban Sprawl: The Formation of Edge Cities

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A century ago, industrialization changed the shape of cities by concentrating population and construction in densely packed central cities. In recent years, cities are changing once again, this time spreading outward and creating what analysts call "edge cities."

URBAN SPRAWL: THE FORMATION OF EDGE CITIES

Not since the expansion of small cities into huge metropolises a century ago have we seen as profound a change in our urban world as the emergence of edge cities. An *edge city* is a new, sprawling, middle-class, automobile-dependent center typically located at the fringe of an older urban area, at the intersection of major highways, where little except villages or farmland existed three decades earlier.

In the second half of the twentieth century, North Americans went through three waves of centrifugal movement away from the older cities. First came the suburbanization of North America, most notably after World War II, as people moved into new homes beyond city boundaries. Next came the malling of North America, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, when we moved our stores out to where we lived. And now, says Joel Garreau (1991), we have moved our means of creating wealth, the essence of urbanism—our jobs—out to where most of us have lived and shopped for two generations. This has led to the rise of edge cities, resulting in profound changes in the ways we live, work, and play. Garreau (1991:8–9) describes the new urban form this way:

> . . . For my sins I once spent a fair chunk of a Christmas season in Tysons Corner, Virginia, stopping people as they hurried about their holiday tasks, asking them what they thought of their brave new world. The words I recorded were searing. They described the area as plastic, a hodgepodge, Disneyland (used as a pejorative), and sterile. They said it lacked livability, civilization, community, neighborhood, and even a soul.
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> These responses are frightening, if Edge City is the laboratory of how civilized and livable urban Americans will be well into the next century. Right now, it is vertigo-inducing. It may have all the complexity, diversity, and size of a downtown. But it can cover dozens of square miles, and juxtapose schools and freeways and atria and shimmering parking lots with corporate lawns and Day-Glo-orange helicopter wind socks. Its logic takes a while to decode.
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> Will we ever be proud of this place? Will we ever drag our visiting relatives out to show off our Edge City, our shining city on the hill? Will we ever feel—for this generation and the ones that follow—that it's a good place to be young? To be old? To fall in love? To have a Fourth of July parade? Will it ever be the place we want to call home?

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It is the evolution of edge cities in the past quarter-century that helps explain the increases in population in nonmetropolitan areas, as discussed in the previous chapter. Garreau suggests that North Americans have reinvented the city in the past two decades and that these new urban agglomerations are now the future. Numbering over 200 in the United States, these edge cities with their malls and office parks now dominate the nation's retail trade and office facilities. . . .

Edge cities are appearing in Canada as well as in the United States, but apparently for different reasons. Unlike the United States, the Canadian government does not provide suburb-enhancing tax deductions for home mortgages, and it has greater control over planning and development. In Canada also, there is a greater emphasis on mass transit; a relative lack of freeways; vibrant, bustling urban centers; and a relative lack of racial problems. Nevertheless, edge cities are flourishing. Toronto, for example, has only 46 percent of the area's market. The rest is found in the nine edge cities growing up around it. These are Midtown–Yorkville and North York–North Yonge to the north; Mississauga, the Downsview Airport area, and the Etobicoke–427 area to the west; and the Don Valley Parkway–401 area, Markham–404 area, Eglington–Don Mills area, and Scarborough to the east.

Joel Garreau (1991:5) points out that attract edge cities have become the dominant form:

> By any functional urban standard—tall buildings, bright lights, office space that represents whitecollar jobs, shopping, entertainment, prestigious hotels, corporate headquarters, hospitals with CAT scans, even population—each Edge City is larger than down-town Portland, Oregon, or Portland, Maine, or Tampa, or Tucson. Already, two-thirds of all [North] American office facilities are in Edge Cities, and 80 percent of them have materialized in only the last two decades.

Characteristics and Commonalities

Garreau identified over 200 new edge cities in the United States and Canada, giving him a comparative base for analysis. Garreau (1991:425) concluded that this fledgling urban form, despite a sprawling, apparently chaotic evolution, actually possesses specific characteristics. A full-blown edge city contains

- At least 5 million square feet of leasable office space;
- At least 600,000 square feet of retail space (the equivalent of an average mall of three large stores and 80 to 100 shops and boutiques);
- An increasing population each weekday morning, marking it as primarily a work center, not a residential suburb;
- A local perception as a single-end destination for mixed use—jobs, shopping, and entertainment.

What one cannot find, however, is a clearly defined territorial boundary, for edge cities do not have the same look (the compactness of closely adjacent buildings and high pedestrian traffic), political organization (elected officials or civic codes), or even visual clues of older cities (signs, edges) to mark their perimeters. As Garreau (1991:6) explains:

> The reasons these places are tricky to define is that they rarely have a mayor or a city council, and just about never match boundaries on a map. We're still in the process of giving each Edge City its name—a project, incidentally, that could use more flair. In New Jersey, for example, there is one with only the laconic designation "287 and 78." The reason there are no "Welcome to" signs at Edge City is that it is a judgment call where it begins and ends.

A common feature of edge cities is that they have sprouted far from the old downtowns, in locales where, thirty years ago, little existed save villages and farmland. They typically evolve adjacent to two or more major highways, usually with shopping malls serving as anchor points. . . .

Types of Edge Cities

Edge cities fall into one of three major categories: (1) uptowns, built on top of preautomobile settlements, such as Pasadena, California, or Arlington, Virginia; (2) boomers, the typical edge city located at the intersection of two major highways and almost always centered on a mall, and (3) greenfields, a master-planned city by one developer on thousands of farmland acres, such as

Irvine, California, and Las Colinas, near the Dallas-Fort Worth airport (Garreau, 1991:115):

> Because boomers, the most common form of edge cities, have grown so profusely throughout North America, urbanists identify three subcategories of them. The strip boomer city is usually only a few hundred yards wide but extends for miles along a major highway. Most representative are the strips along Route 1 in Princeton, Route 128 near the Mass Pike outside Boston, and I-270 in Montgomery County, Maryland, in the Washington, D.C., region. All three suffer severe traffic congestion because of their extended shapes. The node boomer city is relatively dense and contained, such as The Galleria area near Houston, Tysons Corner in Virginia, and the Midtown-Yorkville and North York-North Yonge areas in Toronto. The pig-in-the-python boomer city is a cross between the previous two types. It is a strip that develops one or several nodes along it, such as the Lodge Freeway in Southfield, northwest of Detroit, or King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, northwest of Philadelphia.

Evolving Middle-Class Centers

The majority of metropolitan North Americans now work, shop, and live in and around the 200-plus "new hearths of our civilization." Shopping malls function as the village squares for these new urban centers. Adjacent are the hotels, office buildings, and corporate headquarters, whose tall buildings are not side by side as in a downtown, but instead are located on campuslike settings of grass and trees, gazing at one another at a respectful distance. Surrounding this broad center of employment and shopping are the single-family suburban homes whose occupants now outnumber those living next to the old downtowns.

The rise of edge cities is essentially a function of social class, not race. They are evolving in metropolitan areas with low black populations (Denver, Minneapolis, Seattle, Toronto) as well as in metropolitan areas with high black populations (Atlanta, Chicago, New York, Washington). In the latter, middle-class African Americans (presently about one-third of the total U.S. black population) are just as likely to be part of edge cities as are middle-class whites. Just as the skin of the middle-class North American comes in various hues—brown, black, shades of tan, and white—so too do edge cities reflect this reality.

The edge city, however, has been criticized as plastic and sterile, lacking in livability, civilization, community, neighborhood—in short, having little urban soul (Garreau, 1991:8). It is, however, an unfinished new city form and we do not yet know if, in its maturity, this ugly duckling will emerge as a splendid swan. Whatever its ultimate shape, we do know that the

> Edge City acculturates immigrants, provides child care, and offers safety. It is, on average, an improvement in per capita fuel efficiency over the old suburbia–downtown arrangement, since it moves everything closer to the homes of the middle class.
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> That is why Edge City is the crucible of [North] America's urban future. Having become the place in which the majority of [North] Americans now live, learn, work, shop, play, pray, and die, Edge City will be the forge of the fabled [North] American way of life well into the twenty-first century.

And edge cities are appearing worldwide as well. They now mark the fringes of Bangkok, Beijing, London, Paris, and Sydney. Increased affluence, the desire for more individual transportation, greater use of computers and telecommunications requiring air climate control, and the existence of world financial centers requiring trading floors of at least 20,000 square feet are some of the important elements shaping the growth of edge cities in urban areas throughout the world.

Three Edge City Variations

Not all edge cities are alike, nor does their evolution occur for the same reasons everywhere. The following examples illustrate how the edge city can serve as its own motivation, emerge as a solution to a problem, or simply become the problem.

Edge City as Motivator. By 1990, Oshawa Centre, one of the oldest shopping malls in Ontario, Canada, was showing its age. Originally built for the town's blue-collar population, the place was dark and ugly, some of the stores had outdoor-facing windows and doors plastered with newspaper and

cardboard, and its sales and rental value were declining. Not anymore. The Toronto-based Cambridge Shopping Centres purchased it in 1991 for $145 million. It did so because Garreau had written in *Edge City* that shopping malls usually function as the village squares of the new urban centers. "So, taking that theory," said Ronald Charbon, Cambridge's director of strategic market information, "we said, 'Where are the next edge cities going to occur? Where is the next wave of growth going to occur in the greater metropolitan Toronto area? And are any of our shopping centres sufficiently located to capitalize on that growth?' " (cited in Berman, 1997).

Using census tracts and surveys, Cambridge amassed a population profile of the area, discovering that areas surrounding Oshawa were white-collar and that projections of the area's growth rate were almost three times that in the Greater Toronto Area. So the company took the gamble, invested $40 million in a major facelift, and recruited upscale stores. However, that was only one part of a sophisticated strategy to turn Oshawa Centre (as Garreau described other edge cities) into a village square. Cambridge secured government approval to construct six modest-sized office towers over a twenty-five-year period. The Oshawa Centre is thus in the midst of a massive transformation from a jerry-built suburban mall into a mixed-use development that includes retail, business, government, and community services, all inspired by Garreau's book.

Edge City as the Solution. Since incorporating in 1956, Schaumburg, Illinois, has been what Judy Pasternak (1998) called "the ultimate faceless postwar suburb." Located twenty-six miles northwest of Chicago, the town is home to nearly 74,000 people living in townhouses and subdivisions and shopping in one or more of the sixty-five shopping centers that line its streets. Along its expressway, glassy office towers provide a solid employment base. The one thing lacking in Schaumburg, though, is that it has no center, no downtown, no place to walk to or for people to gather. In fact, it hadn't had a town center since 1875.

That is now changing. The local government tore down a faded strip mall on a thirty-acre site to make way for a downtown center called "Town Square." But this place is no small-town core like the downtowns of older suburbs that developed around train depots generations ago. There are no retail stores lining Main Street. In fact, there is no Main Street. Instead, a supermarket and a cluster of retail stores border a large parking lot, giving this area the look of a shopping center. Nearby is a new library, a brick clock tower, a green wrought-iron gazebo, a pond, curved benches, and a chain restaurant. "It's plastic," grumbled one store owner. Others, however, are more optimistic, hoping that this shopping area—with plenty of parking, strolling amenities, and mixed-use development—will allow community to blossom where none had existed before (Pasternak, 1998).

Edge City as the Problem. The more that Tysons Corner, Virginia—one of Joel Garreau's prime examples of an edge city—continues to grow and thrive economically, the more it remains an object of derisive commentary by architects, city planners, design critics, and urban scholars. Indeed, finding ways to "fix" Tysons Corner has been the goal of several planning studies sponsored by academic institutions, professional groups, and Fairfax County, home to this edge city. Tysons Corner today is larger, in both geographic size and employment, than many U.S. central cities, with over 80,000 jobs and 12,000 residents sharing a few hundred acres of former farmland. Moreover, five new office building projects that will add 10,000 jobs (and perhaps almost as many automobile trips) are under construction, and zoning allows for an additional 20 million square feet of commercial space. Incredibly, though, Metrorail does not go there, making road transit the only means of transportation (Lewis, 1999).

Clearly, mass transit would greatly alleviate the traffic congestion. During weekday rush hours and weekend shopping times, backups are horrendous. Recommendations include creating an elevated rail system looping around Tysons Corner, as well

as a link between Tysons and the regional Metrorail network. But much more is needed. Tysons is not pedestrian-friendly, for there are few sidewalks or signalized crosswalks, which are critical for safely traversing the extraordinarily wide, traffic-choked roads, making walking around Tysons virtually impossible.

Even if traffic congestion could be reduced and pedestrian traffic encouraged, the aesthetic and visual deficiencies, the visual chaos and formlessness would still remain. In the interest of bringing a bit of visual order to Tysons Corner, a county task force developed a plan a few years ago to address streetscapes, pedestrian walkways, site planning of buildings, and open space. Still, Tysons has no civic focus, or heart, and so planners propose a "town center" as a way to "give Tysons more soul." Such an undertaking is still several years away, however. In the meantime, Tysons continues to be emblematic of how poorly we have planned, zoned, and developed much of the landscape girdling our cities since the end of World War II (Lewis, 1999).

CRITICAL-THINKING QUESTIONS

1. What three waves of outward movement from central cities in the United States marked the second half of the twentieth century?
2. In what ways do today's edge cities differ from the old "downtown" cities of a century ago?
3. Why do some critics claim that edge cities are not socially healthy places to live? Do you agree? Why, or why not?

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