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CITIES: Places Sacred, Safe, and Busy

by Joel Kotkin

Humankind's greatest creation has always been its cities. They represent the ultimate handiwork of our imagination as a species, compressing and unleashing the creative urges of humanity. From the earliest beginnings, when only a tiny fraction of humans lived in cities, they have been the places that generated most of mankind's art, religion, culture, commerce, and technology.

Although many often mistakenly see cities as largely a Western phenomenon, with one set of roots, urbanism has worn many different guises. Over the past five to seven millennia, cities have been built in virtually every part of the world from the highlands of Peru to the tip of southern Africa and the coasts of Australia. Some cities started as little more than overgrown villages that, over time, developed momentum and mass. Others have reflected the conscious vision of a high priest, ruler, or business elite, following a general plan to fulfill some greater divine, political, or economic purpose.

The oldest permanent urban footprints are believed to be in Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates River. From those roots sprang a plethora of metropolises that represent the founding experiences of the Western urban heritage, including Ur, Agade, Babylon, Nineveh, Memphis, Knossos, and Tyre. But many other cities sprang up largely independent of these early Mesopotamian and Mediterranean settlements. Some of these, such as Mohenjo-daro and Harrapa in India and Chang'an in China, achieved a scale and complexity equal to any of their Western contemporaries. All of these cities, numerous and various, are however reflective of some greater universal human aspiration.

The key to understanding that universal aspiration lies in the words of the Greek historian Herodotus. While traveling in the 5th century B.C. to places both thriving and struggling, he wrote, "For most of those which were great once are small today; and those that used to be small were great in my own time." Cities throughout history have risen and fallen. The critical questions of Herodotus' time still remain: what makes cities great, and what leads to their gradual demise?

I argue that three critical factors have determined the overall health of cities: the sacredness of place, the ability to provide security and project power, and the animating role of commerce. Where these factors are present, urban culture flourishes. When these elements weaken, cities dissipate and eventually recede out of history.

The Sacredness of Place

Religious structures—temples, cathedrals, mosques, and pyramids—have long dominated the landscape and imagination of great cities. These buildings suggested that the city was also a sacred place, connected directly to divine forces controlling the world. This was true not only in Mesopotamia, but also in the great capital cities of China, in Athens, in Rome, in the city-states of the Italian Renaissance, and among the far-flung urban centers of the classical Islamic world.

In our own, much more secularly oriented time, the role of religion and of sacred place is often downgraded and even ignored—likely at our own great peril, as evidenced by the downfall of overly secular cities from ancient Greece to the centers of Soviet society. Yet even the most secular of cities still seek to recreate the sense of sacred place through towering commercial buildings and evocative cultural structures. Such sights inspire a sense of civic patriotism or awe, albeit without the comforting suggestion of divine guidance. "A striking landscape," historian Kevin Lynch once suggested, "is the skeleton" in which city dwellers construct their "socially important myths."

The Need for Security

Cities must first and foremost be safe. Many contemporary urban areas, notably in western Europe, North America, and East Asia, have taken this precept for granted, but the threat posed by general disorder in many Third World cities and by Islamic terror around the globe may once again focus urbanites on the fundamental issue of security.

An increased focus on safety would be in keeping with historic norms. Many cities, observed historian Henry Pirenne, first arose as places of refuge from marauding nomads, or from general lawlessness. When a city's ability to guarantee the safety of its citizens and institutions has declined, as at the end of the western Roman empire or in crime-infested late-20th Century American inner cities, urbanities have tended to retreat to the hinterland or to migrate to another, safer city.

The Role of Commerce

Yet sanctity and safety alone cannot create great cities. Priests, soldiers, and bureaucrats may provide the prerequisites for urban success, but they cannot themselves produce enough wealth to sustain large populations for a long period of time. Great cities can flourish as administrative, cultural, or artistic centers for only as long as they either create wealth or can extract it from other places.

Over time, virtually every parasitic urban economy—including the most effective of all, ancient Rome—has declined as it lost the ability to siphon off the resources of its periphery. Cities that generated their own wealth have proven far more sustainable.

The self-sustaining city has required an active economy of artisans, merchants, working people, and sadly, in most places and most of history, slaves. Such people, necessarily the vast majority of urbanites, have, since the advent of capitalism, emerged as the primary creators of the city itself.

The Islamic City

To understand how the three critical factors have worked throughout history—and to understand the challenges facing cities around the world today, in the first era in history in which the majority of people live in urban areas—we must look beyond the Western context that has been the focus of most urban historians in America. Only two of the world's twenty largest metropolitan areas, New York and Los Angeles, are fundamentally Western cities. Most of the world's fastest growing cities, such as those in the Islamic world, and many of the most increasingly influential ones, notably in East Asia, have developed in strikingly different historical contexts.

Islam started out as a profoundly urban faith. Mohammed was a successful merchant in Mecca, a long established trading and religious center on the barren Arabian peninsula. Mecca had been influenced by first Hellenistic and then Roman rulers; its varied population included pagans, Jews, and after the 2nd Century, Christians as well.

The old clan loyalties of the desert culture posed a distinct threat to this nascent urban community. Meccans lacked the common ethos and rule of law applicable to unrelated people that had held cities together since Mesopotamian times. In this respect, Mohammed's great achievement was to supplant Bedouin clan ties with a sense of universal moral value—similar to the role played by the Catholic Church to Europe in the Middle Ages.

The Muslim epoch which followed Mohammed's death in 632 represented a new beginning in urban history. Islam broke dramatically with traditions of classical urbanism such as Socrates', who saw "people in the city" as a primary source of knowledge. Islam fostered a sophisticated urban culture but did not worship the city for its own sake. Religious concerns, the integration of the daily lives of men with a transcendent God, overshadowed those of municipal affairs.

The primacy of faith was evident in Islamic cities. Instead of the classical emphasis on public buildings and

spaces, mosques now arose at the center of urban life. Today's West sees Islam as intolerant of modernity and cosmopolitanism—partially because of an actual threat of Islamic terrorists and partially because of more general stereotypes. Yet early Muslim civilization promoted something far different than intolerant jihads. The early Islamic conquerors sought to incorporate newly acquired cities—Damascus, Jerusalem, and Carthage—into what they believed to be a spiritually superior urban civilization.

Other “peoples of the book”—as Muslims considered Jews and Christians—were allowed to practice their faiths with considerable freedom. The Koran simply suggested that these dhimmis be made “tributaries” to the new regime, and thus “humbled.” Otherwise, their rights were assured. This relative toleration led some Jews and even Christians to welcome, and even assist, in the Muslim takeover of their cities.

The cosmopolitan and orderly character of Islamic urban life also spurred the growth of trade, as well as the elevation of the arts and sciences. In the newly conquered cities, the Arab suq (market) improved on the Greco-Roman agora. Rulers developed elaborate commercial districts, with large buildings shaded from the hot desert sun, including storerooms and hostels for visiting merchants.

The new rulers also built large libraries, universities, and hospitals at a pace not seen since Roman times, across a remarkable archipelago of new urban centers. From Cordoba in Spain—which one German nun described as “the jewel of the world”—to Cairo in Egypt, Baghdad in Iraq, Shiraz in Persia, and Delhi in India, Islamic cities provided a model of urbanity at a time when much of Europe's once great urban civilization was largely in disrepair.

The subsequent decline of Islamic cities, dating to perhaps as early as the 17th Century, represents one of the great urban tragedies of the last millennium. Under assault from technologically and economically aggressive Western societies, the great Islamic cities generally fell behind, most particularly in the wake of the Industrial Revolution.

Even the great windfall offered by the presence of massive reserves of energy has failed to reverse this decline. Despite the expenditure of billions in petro-dollars, most of the world's largest Muslim cities—from Cairo and Baghdad to Tehran, Lahore, and Jakarta—continue to lag behind Western cities in economics, technology, and social development. These societies have generally failed to understand the importance to city life of the free flow of commerce, a decent regime of law, and a sense of moral order that tolerates the existence of the non-orthodox.

East Asia Revives the Urban Society

East Asia, the home of one of the world's other great urban traditions, presents a far more hopeful picture of urban prospects. After a precipitous decline that started in the 17th Century, cities in East Asia have in recent times enjoyed a remarkable resurgence.

Today many of the world's most prosperous cities—including the largest, Tokyo—are located in East Asia. Japan forged the first great expression of modern Asian urbanism, consciously blending imported technology and city planning techniques with a uniquely Asian sense of civic values and order. Its model of urban development has inspired others in Asia. This is particularly evident in the sprawling metropolitan areas of Seoul, a onetime Japanese colonial capital which has thrived under American military and economic protection over the past four decades.

Yet arguably the most critical evolution has been the one that took place in Chinese-dominated urban spheres of East Asia. Although old imperial cities such as Beijing continued to decline throughout much of the 20th Century, modern Chinese urbanism evolved, often dramatically, in cities such as Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Singapore under powerful western influence.

Until the Communist takeover in 1949, Shanghai was the greatest of these cities: a corrupt but powerful industrial and commercial center. Subsequently the two colonial cities, Hong Kong and Singapore, showed the way to a new model of Chinese-based urbanity.

Although Hong Kong expanded more rapidly at first, it may well be that Singapore developed the urban archetype that, over time, would dominate much of East Asia. At the time of its independence in 1965, the prospects for the tiny, 225-square-mile Republic appeared dubious at best. The city suffered all the usual problems associated with developing countries: large, crowded slums, criminal gangs, and a relatively unskilled population. The country also faced the hostility from neighboring, far more populous, and predominately Muslim Malaysia from which it had broken away.

Singapore's great achievement lay in employing its new sovereign power to construct one of the stunning urban success stories of the late-20th Century. Under the authoritarian leadership of Cambridge-educated Lee Kuan Yew, tenements were replaced by planned apartment complexes; congested streets were supplanted by a modern road system under which ran an advanced subway system; and crime, once rampant, was nearly eliminated.

The key to Singapore's success lay in economic growth. Lee and his government worked assiduously to exploit Singapore's natural advantage as a harbor and transit center for trans-Asian trade. Moving rapidly from low-wage industries like textiles to high-technology and service industries, Singapore by the end of the 20th Century boasted one of the world's best educated and economically productive populations. Class divisions remained, but most now achieved a standard of living and wealth unimaginable for masses in other cities of the post-colonial world. Income levels, barely \$800 per person in 1964, had risen to over \$23,000 in 1999.

Critically, Lee was not only interested in improving the short-run economic prospects for his tiny city-state; he wanted to develop a new Asian urban culture capable of competing globally well into the 21st Century. "Having given them a clean city, modern amenities, and a strong economy," one of his ministers declared, "we are now thinking of what culture we should give them."

By the mid-1980s, Lee had decided what "kind of culture" he wanted for his people: one built on the bedrock of the city's Asian, and particularly Chinese, values. The self-described Anglophile now promoted an essentially Confucian ethos based on respect for the authority of a wise and powerful mandarin elite. Without this culture, he suggested, Singapore would soon degenerate into what he scathingly described as "another Third World society."

By the 1980s, even China's Communist leaders, long contemptuous of their capitalist-minded overseas brethren and hostile to Western notions of urbanism, began to embrace the Singaporean model. In 1992, China's paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping, openly expressed particular admiration for Singapore's approach to "social order" as the best blueprint for the rapid development of China's own cities.

Under Deng's "Four Modernizations," Beijing gradually loosened its strict control over municipalities. Local officials now encouraged private initiative and outside investment. The creation of special economic zones, such as that in Shenzhen between Hong Kong and Canton, attracted the largest amounts of foreign capital, much of it from Hong Kong, Taipei, and Singapore. Within fifteen years, the area around the Pearl River Delta had, much like British Midlands in the mid-19th Century, become not only the "country's workshop" but rapidly the workshop of the world.

In less than a generation, China's predominately rural society is now being rapidly urbanized. Streets which only two decades ago were filled with bicycles are now choked with automobile traffic. New modern office buildings, hotels, and high-rise apartments dwarf the old Stalinist-style state buildings along the major boulevards. Public markets have reappeared, offering an ever-wider variety of meats, vegetables, and fruits to an increasingly affluent public. Chinese cities, notably Shanghai, now are the stage for some of the world's most ambitious infrastructure projects and most spectacular new skyscrapers.

The Urban Future

The Need for Commerce

Today most governments, private corporations, and non-profits around the world focus on creating both a dynamic economy and reducing the age-old scourge of poverty. In this respect, the brightest immediate prospects for the urban future lie in East Asia. In contrast, the commercial vitality of many older European cities, and at least some in the New World and Australia, seem likely to be ever more challenged—even in the highest value-added activities—by urban centers not only in China, but in India and other Asian countries.

Far more distressing are the economic prospects of the cities of the Third World. These continue to struggle with the historically unprecedented condition of rapid demographic expansion and weak, even negative, economic growth. Until the poverty of these cities—whether in the Middle East, Africa, South America, and parts of Southeast Asia—is adequately addressed, there seems no way for them to develop successful urban centers.

The Continuing Importance of Security

In addition to the economic challenge, the world's cities also face the challenge of maintaining both law and order. Urbanites, to be truly productive, must feel at least somewhat secure in their persons. They also need to depend on a responsible authority capable of administering contracts and enforcing basic codes of commercial behavior.

Today, fear of both crime and capricious authority slows the movement of foreign capital to many Third World cities. Even in relatively peaceful countries, "kleptocratic" bureaucracies deflect business investment to safer and less congenitally larcenous places.

Yet the greatest threat to the urban future comes from Islamic terrorism. In the years following the 2001 attack on New York and Washington, D.C., both individuals and businesses have begun to rethink locating close to prime potential terrorist targets in high-profile urban locations. To the already difficult challenges posed by changing economic and social trends, cities around the world now have to contend with the constant threat of physical obliteration.

The Sacred Place

Despite such threats, the urban ideal has demonstrated a remarkable resilience. Fear rarely is enough to stop the determined builders of cities. For all the cities that have been ruined permanently by war, pestilence, or natural disaster, many others—Carthage, Rome, London, and Tokyo—have been rebuilt, often more than once. Even amidst mounting terrorist threats, city officials and developers not only in New York but in London, Tokyo, Shanghai, and other major cities continue to plan new office towers and other superlative edifices.

Today as much as when cities originated, the value people place on the urban experience over time will prove more important than any assemblage of new buildings. Whether in the traditional urban core or in the expanding periphery, issues of identity and community still largely determine which places ultimately succeed and which do not.

As progenitors of a new kind of human existence, the earliest city-dwellers found themselves confronting vastly different problems than faced in prehistoric nomadic communities and agricultural villages. Urbanites had to learn how to co-exist and interact with strangers from outside their clan or tribe. This required new ways to codify behavior and determine commonly acceptable behavior in family life, commerce, and social discourse.


Today, the lack of a shared moral order could prove as dangerous to the future cities as the most hideous terrorist threats. Cities in the modern West, as historian Daniel Bell has suggested, have depended on a broad adherence to classical and Enlightenment ideals: due process, freedom of belief, the basic rights of property. To shatter these essential principles, whether in the name of the marketplace, multicultural separatism, or religious dogma, would render the contemporary city in the West helpless to meet the enormous challenges before it.

Yet history tells us that the West represents only one road to successful urbanism. History abounds with models developed under explicit pagan, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu auspices. We cannot ignore that notable success in city-building has occurred in recent years under neo-Confucian belief systems, amalgamating modernity and tradition. Over time these systems must also find ways to deal with the ill-effects of unrestrained market capitalism on society and, particularly in China itself, the self-interested corruption of the ruling authoritarian elite.

It is to be hoped that the Islamic world, having found Western values wanting, may discover in their own glorious past—replete with cosmopolitan values and belief in scientific progress—the means to salvage their troubled urban civilization. From that model they may learn that successful cities must adapt their moral order to accommodate differing populations.

Cities can only thrive by occupying a sacred place that both orders and inspires the complex natures of gathered masses of people. For five thousand years or more, the human attachment to cities has served as the primary forum for political and material progress. It is in the city, this ancient confluence of the sacred, safe, and busy, where humanity's future will be shaped for centuries to come.

This article is excerpted from Joel Kotkin's new book, *The City: A Global History*, recently published by Modern Library. —ed.

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