

Journal of Comparative Urban Law and Policy

Volume 5

Issue 1 *A Festschrift in Honor of Arthur C. Nelson on the Occasion of his Retirement - Agenda for Building a Changing World Responsibly: Commentaries and Reflections by Leaders in Urban Planning, Policy, and Design*

Article 17

2022

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Recommended Citation

Galster, George (2022) "Planning the Opportunity Metropolis: An Agenda for an Era of Intensifying Technology, Climate and Health Challenges," *Journal of Comparative Urban Law and Policy*. Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 17, 176-187.

Available at: <https://readingroom.law.gsu.edu/jculp/vol5/iss1/17>

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PLANNING THE OPPORTUNITY METROPOLIS
AN AGENDA FOR AN ERA OF INTENSIFYING TECHNOLOGY,
CLIMATE, AND HEALTH CHALLENGES

George C. Galster*

ABSTRACT

Urban planners focus on the spatial arrangements of residences, businesses, institutions, infrastructure and human-built amenities, and the market- and government-driven processes that shape these arrangements. They start with the basic supposition that these arrangements strongly affect individuals' health, prosperity, and happiness as well as the overall level of opportunity, solidarity, and satisfaction in society. Their recommendations about changing the built environment should be guided by the norms of efficiency and equity, with the latter being framed as creating disproportionate benefits to those who are least advantaged.

This essay begins with an overview of the metropolitan opportunity structure theory to frame how we are influenced by cities and what justice requires if we are to create an equal opportunity society. It then outlines the potential effects of imminent changes in technology, climate, and health on furthering spatial inequalities. Finally, it advances a bold agenda for thwarting these undesirable consequences.

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, urban planning has confronted by necessity the most daunting challenges that cities can engender. Yet, arguably, "we ain't seen nothing yet." Indeed, planners are likely to face unprecedented challenges in the 21st century wrought by powerful changes in multiple domains. I will focus upon three: technology, climate, and health. Developments in these three domains will undoubtedly render massive changes in virtually all aspects of our metropolitan areas, though in ways we can barely anticipate. So, what's a planner to do?

I argue in this essay that *metropolitan opportunity structure theory* offers a framing that can guide and motivate a responsible, progressive planning agenda for the rapidly changing world. Our best hope for building an opportunity metropolis

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that will be just and resilient in the face of these technology-, climate-, and health-related challenges is to aim for a compact, energy-efficient built environment comprised of socially diverse, multi-use neighborhoods serviced by redundant networks of utilities produced in a decentralized fashion.

This essay proceeds as follows. I begin by presenting an overview of the metropolitan opportunity structure theory as a framing for how we are influenced by cities and what justice requires if we are serious about creating an equal opportunity society. Next, I present what I view as the key forthcoming changes in technology, climate and health and how they will affect how and where we work, play, reside, and access public services in ways that will further spatial inequalities. This will set the stage for the final section, in which I advance a bold agenda for thwarting these undesirable consequences.

METROPOLITAN OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE THEORY

Over a quarter-century ago, I developed the theory of *metropolitan opportunity structure* as way to comprehend holistically and systematically how geographic variations in the residences, businesses, institutions, infrastructure and human-built amenities across multiple scales (neighborhood, political jurisdiction, metropolitan) come into being, become spatially differentiated, and then shape residents' prospects for personal development, schooling, health, work, and, ultimately, socioeconomic advancement (Galster and Killen, 1995). There are two central arguments in this theory. First, metropolitan context at multiple geographic scales affects our opportunities both directly and indirectly. Directly, it alters the market and social payoffs one reaps from personal attributes such as initiative, creativity, intelligence, and educational credentials. Where you live will affect the degree to which the evaluations of your attributes are distorted by, e.g., your race and sex. Indirectly, it shapes the bundle of personal attributes one acquires over time by molding in many ways one's perceptions of what options are feasible and most desirable regarding major life choices in the domains of fertility, education, health, work, and crime (Galster and Sharkey, 2017; Galster, 2019: ch. 8).

Second, as individuals' life-choices are aggregated, the encompassing metropolitan area sees a slow transformation of its opportunity structure. As some people succeed economically, they will be able to move to more prestigious neighborhoods, even perhaps spawning sufficient demand that new, exclusive suburban municipalities are formed. Less economically successful households may be relegated to the least-desirable niches in the region, depending on the geographic patterns of the area's private housing quality submarkets and government-subsidized housing. The degree to which this spatial sorting by ability-to-pay is color-blind will depend on the structure of local discriminatory practices in real estate and mortgage markets. As economic and racial segregation patterns alter, so too will the fiscal capacities of local municipalities and school districts throughout

the region, thereby shifting the geography of public services, facilities and institutional qualities. Business will also respond, with high-end retail, personal service, entertainment and restaurant sectors—and their associated employment—gravitating toward pockets of growing disposable income. All these interconnections among individuals, market players, and non-market actors play out in a complex web of mutually reinforcing cumulative causation that create huge geographic disparities in multiple domains and spatial scales (Galster, 2019: chs. 1, 7).

Thus, at one level metropolitan opportunity structure theory is merely a detailed, systemic recitation of the old planning adage, “we make our cities and then they make us.” At a deeper level, however, this theory raises profound ethical questions (Dawkins, 2017). If individuals’ chances for socioeconomic success depend crucially on their specific residential contexts within the larger metropolitan opportunity structure, yet these contexts are radically different across this structure due to the mutually reinforcing interplay of market and governmental forces, how can we claim to be an “equal opportunity society?”

The transparent ethical implication following from metropolitan opportunity structure theory is that urban planners should both strive to improve the ability of all households to reside in all locations within metropolitan areas and equalize to the degree feasible the bundles of physical, economic, social and institutional attributes across places. These efforts comprise what I term “planning the opportunity metropolis.” As of this writing, we clearly have not succeeded in this quest, though during the Obama administration many notable initiatives were undertaken (Geevarghese, 2020). Unfortunately, by many measures such as concentration of poverty and inequality of neighborhood conditions we have since gone backward in equalizing the geography of opportunity (Eberhart, Wial and Lee, 2020). Even more sobering, from my vantage point, I see things getting worse.

EMERGING CHALLENGES TO PLANNING THE OPPORTUNITY METROPOLIS

The daunting challenge of the 21st century is that such progressive planning efforts will increasingly conflict with three interlinked and increasingly powerful forces related to technology, climate, and health. In highlighting the salience of these accelerating forces, I draw upon the penetrating works of Friedman (2016) and Harari (2015, 2018). In the domain of technology, I focus on advances in communication, transportation, automation, artificial intelligence, and biotechnology realms. In the domain of climate, my primary concern is with changing patterns of habitability, storms, wildfires and sea levels. In the domain of health, I concentrate on the impacts of communicable diseases and pollution. Separating these domains is arbitrary, of course, since they interact among each other in multiple ways; some are compounding and others confounding. For example, extreme flooding following more intense storms can intensify epidemics of

leptospirosis and mosquito-borne diseases, but advances in vaccines may succeed in blunting these impacts (Brody, 2021). Rising sea levels may destroy subterranean mass transit services, forcing more travelers into vehicles that produce more air pollution, leading to upsurges in asthma.

In what follows, I will offer my speculations about how aspects of technology, climate and health will mold the metropolitan opportunity structure, likely predominantly in ways that intensify inequalities of opportunity. I organize the presentation by considering forthcoming changes in how and where we will work, play, reside, and access public services. This will set the stage for the final section, which advances an agenda that aims to thwart these undesirable consequences.

How and Where Will We Work?

Emerging technologies will continue to transform the nature and location of employment in our metropolitan areas. Vestiges of employment in industries manufacturing mass-produced products, now predominantly located in suburban areas, will increasingly be replaced by automated systems. Only small-scale, artisanal production at small-scale, dispersed sites is likely to persist. Internet-based marketing and delivery systems have revolutionized the consumer wholesale and retail sectors, rendering obsolete countless brick-and-mortar stores clustered in shopping districts and the employment associated with them, and (partially) replacing them with increasingly automated warehousing and delivery systems based on large, peripheral sites. Related technologies in communication and GIS have meant that personal transportation services are increasingly supplied by “sharing economy” drivers based at their homes. Yet, opportunities for both personal and business shipping drivers (previously based in peripheral sites) may soon disappear with the emergence of autonomous (road and air) vehicles. The domain of business, professional, legal, medical, and technical services will witness more automation and off-loading of responsibilities on to customers through DIY expert systems accessed remotely, with resulting eroding needs for centralized office capacity. The continued, long-term decline in air travel costs will lead (post-COVID-19) to growing demand for those working in the travel, tourism, and hospitality industries, with employment remaining primarily in-person and centralized around local cultural attractions. Though many personal service and care, entertainment, recreation, and restaurant jobs will necessarily continue to be supplied in-person by those who work in small-scale establishments clustering near consumers with substantial disposable income, increasingly many of these consumption activities will be delivered to the home. The revolutionary employment implications of artificial intelligence (AI) systems, perhaps coupled with Big Data and brain bioengineering in a way that brings “bespoke pleasures” to their apotheosis, can only be faintly glimpsed.

Climate concerns similarly will profoundly shape the type and geography of employment prospects. Shifts from carbon-based to alternative “green” energy generation sources and associated infrastructure will be associated with major transformations that will deeply alter the industrial landscapes of entire regions, as well as within metropolitan areas. Transitioning to a low-carbon economy will certainly create many construction and building materials supply jobs across the nation. The less-felicitous side of the same coin is that the worsening climate crisis will necessitate more employment in construction and repair in the aftermath of intensified windstorms, floods and wildfires, and the fortification of cities threatened by rising sea levels.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced huge segments of the business, professional, technical, financial, legal and personal services sectors to work from home, inadvertently supplying a natural experiment of how efficient and equitable a more decentralized, home-based economy might be. Though the full implications of this natural experiment are only now starting to emerge, I think it likely that we will see a systematic reduction in the demand for large-scale office spaces and, concomitantly, the need for commuting to such concentrated locations of white-collar employment. Hopefully, this will yield a net reduction in transportation congestion and pollution, and the repurposing of redundant roadways into recreational, socializing, or even solar energy-generation spaces.

How and Where Will We Play?

Internet-based communication and entertainment technologies have revolutionized the way we play and socialize. Though it is not obvious whether this has meant that we are spending significantly more time within the home instead of outside it, I think we can predict that increasingly our individual and social pleasures will be supplied via home-delivery electronics. Health-related concerns over in-person social gatherings (especially in large-scale venues) and comfort-related concerns in increasingly inhospitable outdoor settings will only intensify this trend. Once again, the COVID-19 experience has reinforced for many of us how much of our recreation, socialization and entertainment can be easily obtained at home online. As we participate in these activities, of course, various devices are collecting information about us. AI systems are searching for patterns within such Big Data with the aim of marketing sources of pleasure ever-more-effectively. It is conceivable that advances in brain chemistry and bioengineering will introduce revolutionary ways in which we can safely play in the comforts of our climate-controlled, air-purified homes. The distinction between “reality” and “virtual reality” may be obliterated. If so, centralized, large-scale institutions (think concert halls, theaters, stadia, museums, beer halls) devoted to the collective sharing of entertainment will be rendered obsolete.

How and Where Will We Reside?

The intersection of technology, climate, and health concerns will radically transform tomorrow's housing stock to make it more efficient, private and self-sufficient. Homes will not just need to be better insulated, but also embody systems for passive solar, photovoltaic, wind and/or geothermal energy production and the capture and storage of rainwater. These dwelling-specific systems will reduce dependency on the centralized natural gas, water and electricity production and distribution networks that will become increasingly vulnerable to climate-related disruptions. Air purification systems will become standard operating equipment to ward off airborne disease and wildfire smoke. The interior of homes also will be reconfigured to provide for potentially multiple "home offices" for different members of the family working or going to school remotely. High-speed/high-capacity internet will be a necessity for work, play and education. With reduced needs for daily commuting and the advent of autonomous private transportation, garages may be rendered obsolete, and their erstwhile wasteful footprints repurposed.

Where we live is likely to shift as dramatically as how we live. In broadest geographic terms, climate change will gradually force the reallocation of American population away from areas that are too hot, too dry, and/or too low to sustain human life, agriculture or other economic activities without incurring unacceptable costs for protection or remediation. In terms of exemplar metropolitan areas for each category, think Phoenix AZ, Bismarck ND and Miami FL. Climate-related intensification of episodic windstorms, flooding, and wildfires may similarly render other areas too unsafe—and too expensive to perpetually repair—to occupy in large numbers. Finally, the incidence of many severe infectious diseases borne by mosquitos (dengue fever, West Nile disease, malaria), ticks (Lyme disease, encephalitis, Rocky Mountain spotted fever) and other vectors rises with ambient temperatures, which could render some places too unhealthy to occupy. The reverse side of the population-shift coin is, of course, that temperate, wet, elevated regions should witness growth in their populations.

Changes in employment patterns will facilitate a more geographically footloose pattern of residences, both between and within metropolitan areas. As I explained above, increasing shares of the workforce will be working more from home, thereby permitting residence farther from places of employment since commuting will be less frequent. Independent contractors for multiple employers may be completely untethered from any single place of employment and, in some cases, any single metropolitan area. In both circumstances, we should expect more of these home-based workers to choose residential locations predominantly on the basis of quality of life (including health and education) for their families, not on commuting costs. Historically, reductions in commuting costs have produced less

compact cities, with new residential developments mushrooming at low densities at the fringes of metropolitan areas, often involving the concomitant creation of municipalities.

In concert, these climate- and health-related drivers of population redistribution—partially mediated by changing employment patterns—will produce massive recalibrations of opportunity structures both across and within metropolitan areas. On the one hand, we will see renewed impetus for sprawling, low-density development. In the extreme, a new generation of “shrinking cities” may arise whose contractions will not be due to deindustrialization or exhaustion of a finite natural resource but, rather, to their vulnerability to climatic and health threats and the changing locus of work. Even though their root causes differ, however, we know enough about how decline intensifies spatial inequalities within a metropolis to predict that this new generation of declining places will extract disproportionately cruel penalties on the most disadvantaged unless we intervene aggressively. On the other hand, we will likely also see many struggling rural communities and older, erstwhile industrial-based cities being revitalized. (If this sounds like “rust-belt revanchism,” so be it.)

How and Where Will We Access Public Services?

Technological advances and the foregoing changes in where we work, play and reside will fundamentally transform the nature of local public services and how they are financed. Jurisdictions that relied heavily on property, income, and/or sales tax revenues generated disproportionately by traditional Central Business District activities and clusters of large-scale cultural, entertainment and sporting venues will find these tax bases steadily eroded. So, too, will those that hosted hubs of energy and water production and distribution but will witness their erstwhile utility revenues fall as these services are supplanted by those generated by individual households, as explained above. By contrast, other jurisdictions that previously performed the function of “bedroom communities” will find their fiscal capacity enhanced as more and more of their residents convert their homes to loci of income generation. The fiscal-geographic consequences of other evolutions in the economy are foggier. For example, what local jurisdiction(s) should appropriately tax goods and services that are ordered online and consumed at homes in cities far from where they are produced?

This evolving but muddled palette of fiscal stresses and opportunities will force local jurisdictions to develop novel ways of taxation that technological advances can operationalize. Internet-connected sensors embedded in infrastructure and remote cameras focusing their facial recognition software on public spaces, for example, provide seductive opportunities for charging unprecedented types of user fees. Automated cameras now being introduced for monitoring auto speeds are but one tip of the forthcoming quiver of innovative fiscal arrows.

Again, however, we must consider which sorts of jurisdictions possess the professional expertise and financial capacity to innovate and install these advanced revenue generators. Under the current structure, a local government can only raise revenue by taxing the people, property and/or transactions located within its jurisdiction. Yet, it is fundamentally constrained in doing so by the real fear that all these tax bases may migrate to a neighboring jurisdiction to avoid higher tax rates. Thus, those jurisdictions suffering large or sustained shocks to their tax base will find themselves trapped in a downward fiscal spiral, with retrenched public services and higher tax rates driving out ever more tax base. These fiscally strapped jurisdictions are least likely to succeed in the forthcoming “brave new world” of local public finance.

A PLANNING AGENDA FOR THE 21ST CENTURY OPPORTUNITY METROPOLIS

Crystal balls can never be fully transparent. Such is especially true when prognosticating about the long-term impacts of forces as multidimensional and interconnected as technology, climate and health. Nevertheless, based on the preceding analysis I am willing to make several predictions about the future metropolitan opportunity structure with some confidence.

- First, there will be absolute employment declines in traditional Central Business Districts, the formerly dense clusters of jobs in the business, professional, technical, legal and financial services sectors and associated employment in downtown retail, personal services and restaurant sectors.
- Second, there will be a significant rise in home-based economic activity: telecommuting, independent contracting, “gig”-work, artisanal production.
- Third and relatedly, because such home-based work will be increasingly disconnected from traditional employment centers, centripetal forces driving dispersed residential and personal service outlet development will grow more powerful.
- Fourth, there will be burgeoning uncertainty and flux in where work that must be conducted in-person takes place, both in the construction-repair sector and in others.
- Fifth, the intra- and inter-metropolitan variation in dangers to people and private and public property associated with unpredictable climate- and disease-related catastrophes will rise.
- Sixth, the local fiscal consequences of the aforementioned geographic transformations will be severe, but advantaged suburban jurisdictions are likely best positioned to adapt without draconian cuts in public services and/or tax rate increases.

In concert, these predictions suggest massive forthcoming shifts in the geographical contours of opportunity, both among and within metropolitan areas. If accomplished within the current regime of land use and public finance policy, these shifts seem likely, in my view, to increase spatial disparities in opportunity in a regressive fashion. This fear motivates my proposed agenda for the opportunity metropolis.

The goals of my policy agenda are two-fold. The first is to equalize the opportunity structures of metropolitan America by spatial reallocations of population, buildings, infrastructure, and fiscal capacities. The second is to increase the resiliency of the equalized opportunity structures of metropolitan America to unpredictable shocks wrought by unforeseen technological, climatic and health-related changes. The intermediate (and mutually reinforcing) objectives toward reaching these goals would be to:

- Decrease pollution and waste of energy and natural resources associated with buildings and transportation
- Decrease annual intra-urban distances travelled per capita
- Increase the share of trips taken on foot, person-powered vehicles, and public transit
- Increase residential densities and the diversity of land uses at all spatial scales
- Increase the socioeconomic and racial-ethnic diversity of all neighborhoods
- Increase the adaptation and reuse of outdated non-residential structures
- Increase the redundancies in power generation and water retention by building capacity at the dwelling and neighborhood levels
- Increase the fiscal capacity of distressed local governments
- Broaden the accessibility of high-speed internet connections and associated hardware

In sum, these objectives aim to bring urban activities closer together and diversify them across all spatial scales, bring in-person workers closer to their places of employment, and improve access of the less-advantaged to high-quality housing, travel options and public services. While many of these objectives are embodied in other recent, forward-looking urban agendas (Greene et al., 2016; Cohen, 2018; Talen, 2019; Galster, 2019: ch.10; Geevarghese, 2020; Joseph and Khare, 2020; Wial, 2020), mine are more comprehensive, integrating physical design, communication, energy and water infrastructure, transportation, subsidized housing, and public finance concerns.

The federal and, potentially, state and local policy agenda to meet these objectives can be divided into two broad domains: regulatory and fiscal. The components of the regulatory domain include:

- Growth boundaries established around all urbanized areas
- The abolition of single-family zoning and residential-only zoning
- Nationwide inclusionary zoning for larger-scale residential construction and renovation developments
- Tougher building codes for building efficiency and net-energy consumption
- Progressively more stringent emission standards on all fossil-fuel-powered heating, cooling and propulsion systems
- Revisions to housing policies related to place-based and tenant-based subsidies that expand the spatial options for where lower-income people can live

The components of the fiscal domain include:

- Guaranteed affordability of an enhanced conception of “decent” housing that includes not only sanitary shelter of adequate size and utilities but also climate controls, air purification and fast internet access
- Financial incentives to residential and non-residential property owners to install features for water retention/reuse and energy saving and generation
- Investments in upgrading and expanding where necessary the electricity, water, sewage, and internet distribution networks and the electricity and water storage capacity in decentralized ways
- Significant expansions and reformulation of revenue sharing from higher- to lower-levels of government, whereby not only fiscal stress but progress toward meeting the aforementioned regulatory reforms affect the amount a jurisdiction receives

Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve deeply into each one of the above components, I should make their overall thrust and intended synergisms clear. Given the expected rising salience of the home as place for work, play and education, we should ensure that all citizens have a right to occupy dwellings that can fulfill all these functions without requiring more than 30% of income being spent on rent and utilities. These homes should not only be more energy-efficient (even net positive in many cases) but also resilient in the face of natural disasters through their connection to a more decentralized and redundant system of utilities. Given that homes will provide more powerful attractors for those providing

personal services, we should create neighborhoods that are more physically compact and diverse in both land uses and social classes if we are to avoid inequitable and wasteful commuting. Several regulatory reforms above are designed to permit such dwelling type and land-use diversity in places where they are now homogeneous, and the expansion of place- and tenant-based housing subsidies will enable those of more modest means to take advantage of these new residential opportunities. Intergovernmental transfers are designed to provide strong financial incentives for lower levels of government to enact the requisite regulatory changes and the resources for undertaking the needed infrastructure investments. Hopefully, these mutually reinforcing components of my agenda will not only thwart the forthcoming forces of inequality but will bend the metropolitan opportunity structures toward justice.

CONCLUSION

Because of the ways we have built our metropolitan areas and allowed them to be populated, the “American equal opportunity society” has morphed from a hallowed premise into a hollow promise. Spatial inequalities across and within metropolitan areas are likely to intensify as changes in technology, climate and health accelerate during the upcoming century. We can expect these changes to drive fundamental shifts in how and where we work, play, reside, and access public services. Some shifts are predictable, but most are not. Thus, to minimize the danger from unexpected disasters prudence demands that we enhance the flexibility and resilience of our cities’ land use and population patterns, structures, and infrastructures. More optimistically, these fundamental shifts will provide a provocative palette for a transformative planning “do-over:” painting in the portrait of a compact, energy-efficient, diverse, just city of opportunity for all. Whether as a nation we will take advantage of this opportunity represents the salient planning challenge for the 21st century.

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