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Geography of Opportunity & the Whirling Gyre: An American Urban Dilemma A Personal View

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.
>
> *The Second Coming*
> W. B. Yeats, 1921

Dear Reader, as I am neither a professional or academic Sociologist nor an academic Architect, I write to you from a personal perspective. As a citizen of the United States and as a professional architect from New York City taking a leave-of- absence from active practice, I offer the following observations about some of America's current and significantly serious urban problems. *Caveat emptor*: as the ideas proposed in this paper are not empirically researched nor systematically analyzed, one might do well to heed the phrase often heard in the practice of architecture regarding a critic's response to one's own design – "it's only one person's opinion."

The physical law of centrifugal force best describes the current fragmentation of American cities. American society has not yet been able to create a counterbalancing centripetal force to hold these dense and intense societal constructs together. American cities seem to be flying apart – physically and socially, in built form and urban fabric and in personal interactions and civic institutions. Though New York City atypically represents American cities, as a microcosm of the full range of current urban ills it shines. The litany of its problems is familiar and long:

- Economic Poverty
- Poverty of the Public Education System
- Poverty of the Public Healthcare System
- Poverty of the Built Environment, especially Public Housing
- Poverty of Government Intelligence regarding Planning, Urban Design and the Social Value of Real Estate Development
- Poverty of the Architectural Profession's sense of Social Responsibility and Participation in socially enlightened planning and design endeavors
- Poverty of Race Relations
- Poverty of meaningful Public Dialogue and Debate regarding concern for the welfare of the Commonwealth
- Poverty of the Judicial System
- Spiritual Poverty

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• Demise or flight of the Middle Class and of Business
• The Increasingly Unequal Distribution of Wealth
• Poverty of Political Will to address Urban Problems
• Public and Private Inertia, based on the Fear of Change, to address the Needs of the Present

Not all cities in America manifest all these urban problems; some have fewer while others have more. Some experience a greater intensity in fewer areas; others a broader range of less pressing concerns. I would argue that the constantly recurrent and fundamental cause of continued urban decay where it does occur in American cities, which is the majority of them, lies in economic poverty and racism. For example, one only has to think of Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, Atlanta, Miami, New Orleans, Memphis, Detroit, Chicago. Oakland and Los Angeles to recognize the close relationship between economic poverty and publicly and privately institutionalized racism. I define institutional racism as a structured and highly formalized significant practice that unconsciously and/or irrationally plans procedures to exclude people based on the color of their skin. In America it generally manifests itself covertly, subtly and unobtrusively, yet it remains pernicious, malignant and insidious. If nothing else, it is economically inefficient, wasteful and ignorant. Economic poverty and racism generally function correlatively in urban settings. Granted, this is old news, but what is new is how part of American society is responding in built form to the social, physical and economic implosion of urban cores.

"Edge Cities" are one of White America's answer to the dilemma of how wealth and people can leave the problems of the core city while remaining urban. With the evolution of Edge Cities, American automobile culture seems to have proceeded well into its third phase of historic development. The first phase occurred between approximately 1900 and World War II with the auto industry's initial development and consequent consolidation of its product manufacturing and distribution systems. The second phase followed between the end of WWII and roughly 1975 with its initial development and consolidation of "auto suburbia" on a national scale. The third seems to be the sub- or exurbanization of private wealth and trans-urbanization of corporate wealth. That is moving business concentrations from the city core or Central Business District to form nodes along the thin edge, the narrow transition zone, found between what is urban and suburban – the urban/suburban "Grey Zone". If the images of Detroit and Los Angeles symbolize respectively the evolution of American cities under the impact of the automobile during its first two developmental phases, then Atlanta, Georgia represents the third.

The importance of the automobile was understood quickly in the US. As early as 1916 the power and consensus of national political will was demonstrated in a Federal-States partnership to construct a network of rural and national roadways. The initial phase of America's "automobilization" essentially facilitated the rapid and substantial national demographic shifts that occurred from South to North during the 1920's with the country's large economic expansion and from the South, East and Central US to the West during the 1930's with its severe economic crisis. The automobile was not the cause of these American migrations, but it certainly helped them. One should note that the 1920 census confirmed that the American population was for the first time more than 50% urban – America was no longer rural.

In the second phase of American "automobilization", the power of the auto industry after WWII to conspire successfully and change drastically the physical landscape of both American cities and country was quickly consolidated. The auto/trucking industry in league with certain U.S. government defense, transportation and business/manufacturing interests managed to influence the direction of federal policy towards one that across the American landscape sanctioned and underwrote the development of an auto- oriented instead of a mass transit suburban/urban form. The military establishment wanted the government to finance the construction of housing for its returning war servicemen as well as to build an improved road system for defense purposes. The auto/trucking industry wanted to supplant the railroad industry as the nation's predominate transportation industry. In league with the military, it promoted as a national defense security concern the need for a federal interstate highway system; such a network would also facilitate the suburbanization of cities, thereby adding to the demand for more automobiles. The housing and highway construction industries obviously wanted to see more homes and highways built. This was accomplished at the expense of local, state and national public transportation systems and achieved by:

- The Federal Housing Administration becoming in 1938 a home building agency by granting direct home loans and loan guarantees;
- The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the G.I. Bill of Rights, which made low-interest loans for housing;
- The Veteran Administration's Home Loan Act of 1948 which also made direct home loans and provided insured loans;
- The Federal Housing Act's authorization in 1949 to construct 810,00 units of low-income housing. This precipitated the development of planned high density urban housing prototypes – environments that segregated and isolated the poor from the middle class. Though originally of mixed racial populations, they soon became ghettoes for poor African- Americans and Hispanics when the more economically successful whites left; and
- The National System of Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956 which essentially killed the chance for a national public mass transportation system and guaranteed the auto/trucking industry a nationally extensive, sophisticated and government (taxpayer) subsidized inter- and intra-city highway network thus creating even more orders for autos.

Though the U.S. government attempted to revive the home construction industry in the late 1930's, WWII thwarted that effort. But stimulated by the enormous wealth created by WWII which afterwards flowed from personal savings into the home building industry, the demographic shift away from cities to suburbia began its maturation process. The Federal government fundamentally encouraged and assisted America's suburbanization through guaranteed financing for millions of post-WWII housing units as well as by paying for 90% of the interstate highway system, which then served as local automobile commuter arteries between suburbia and city center.

Between 1946 and 1951 William Levitt completed his first "Levittown" in Nassau County, Long Island, New York, which would thenceforth become the prototype for suburban development track housing throughout America. In the 1950's Los Angeles through its explosive suburban development became the universal symbol of American urban automobile culture. One should remember, however, that Los Angeles in 1920 was America's fifth largest city and had the most extensive electric trolley, i.e. mass transit, system in the nation. It did not build its first freeway until 1930, which went to Pasadena. By 1940 the auto had victimized Mr. Huntington's L.A. electric streetcar system.

Also during the second phase of "automobilization", the creation, development, refining and final finessing of the suburban Shopping Mall and Office Park occurred. This further sapped the commercial and financial vitality of urban centers. By 1970 total ridership (not percentage of population) on public transportation had fallen below the level of 1910; by 1975 approximately 75% of the interstate highway system was complete; and by 1980 76% of Americans lived in urban/suburban communities. The time was ripe between the two oil shocks of the 1970's for the incipient development of "Edge Cities" – a place where corporate power and wealth could start to consolidate itself into safe mini-urban cores in the transition zone between rural or suburban and urban centers. The 1990 Census confirmed that the majority of Americans had finally moved homes from the city to suburbia – over 50% of America now lives in an officially classified suburban environment. Thus in the short span of 70 years the U.S. has transformed itself from a rural to an urban and then to a suburban society. American industrialization precipitated the transition from rural to urban, the auto from urban to suburban. As political interests and policies followed America's rural- urban transformation, so too have they followed the demographic shift to suburbia. Cities now face even further erosion of their political, thus economic, power to address appropriately their own problems. Since suburbanites by definition do not live in cities and if they no longer work in or near city centers, then their political/economic interests regarding the welfare of cities shrink drastically if not disappear altogether. In many instances they become adversarial.

Edge Cities exemplify the third developmental phase of America's ever transforming auto culture – another permutation of urban fragmentation seen in the new polished architecture of corporate wealth and commercial isolation. Edge Cities are small urban nodes that develop along major highway transportation corridors at points of significant traffic interchange. During standard working hours they serve or accommodate a specifically homogenous population. At night they become ghost towns – hollow, fossil mini-cities of light. These nodes are essentially centered around or focused primarily on business; they are, however, more than "office parks". As vital urban nodes generally serving a special daytime clientele they also contain all necessary support systems and facilities required to maintain their narrowly limited viability. In addition to their initial and primary reason for development – office space – they also generally possess the following elements in some form or combination: commercial retail space, hotels, restaurants/bars, market rate housing, entertainment (movie) and health facilities (sports and care), police and firemen, green space, connections to the urban infrastructure and occasionally public transportation systems. The primary reasons Edge Cities developed are:

- Inability of cities to accommodate new and increasing commercial and residential demands as they fail to renew/revitalize/reconstruct decayed, inadequate or failing infrastructures;
- Availability of large tracts of affordable land (only found beyond urban cores) with enough horizontal space for parking. Axiomatically, it is less expensive to build horizontal than vertical parking;
- Electronic globalization of the Business Community which essentially eliminates the need for a direct physical presence in urban cores;

• The Development of a Post-Industrial Service Economy with its growing Labor Force;

• Lower Construction Costs since many of the high costs of building in an urban core are avoided, e.g. often the use of non-union construction labor and trades, lower material transportation and staging costs, lower permit and construction fees etc.;

• Often lower long term Labor Costs for facility support/maintenance staff;

• Often initial Tax and/or other Financial Incentives from local governments;

• Often lower long term Tax Liabilities;

• The potential to realize greater Real Estate Equity Appreciation than in urban cores;

• Fewer or less stringent Planning Requirements;

• Accessibility to Major Highways, i.e. compared to city centers, the relative ease of getting employees to and from work;

• Urban safety within a manageable urban scale and located in a more attractive environment;

• Failure of the society to endorse, build and use Mass Transit;

• Oil availability and its decrease in real costs to pre- 1979 levels, which has fueled

• The rapid increase in the last 15 years of America's possession and use of private automobiles.

The expansive growth in the 1970's, and especially in the 1980's, of personal automobile use at the expense of public transportation created a condition analogous to that which initially facilitated post-WWII suburbanization. William Levitt realized as war manufacturing plants after WWII were transitioning into consumer base industries that if one could not organize the production of houses as consumer items in existing factories, then the factory assembly line process – an efficiently functional industrial operational procedure – should be taken to the site where new homes were to be built. Levitt rationalized the building trades organizationally and methodologically at the construction site. Similarly if one considers the disadvantages of working in an urban core, then the thinking follows that if it is difficult for employees to get to their place of work or they work in an unattractive environment, one must then try to take the workplace to them and/or to make it more physically appealing. The workplace needs to be located at least where its access is not a burdensomely onerous obstacle to overcome each workday. ("Burdensome" has to be defined by the limit of annoyance a worker will tolerate – this threshold obviously corresponds to and deviates with the health of the local and national economy). Conversely, a "burdensome" hurdle, a physical or financial one, can be employed as a clever social device to exclude people who may be "undesirable". The use of this type of hurdle may be conscious or unconscious, yet it is a reality.

I would argue that the combination of decaying social/civic institutions and urban infrastructures combined with a substantially expanding work force population and its acquisition of a large number of automobiles which were added to the highway- parking system fundamentally helped precipitate the Edge City phenomenon. The number of American workers 16 years and over increased between 1980 and 1990 from 96,617,000 to 115,070,000 or a 19.1% growth – in only 10 years the work force grew just less than 1/5. While the number of cars, trucks or vans during that same period increased from 81,258,00 to 99,592,000 or 22.6% – tangibly more than the increase in the number of workers. This is especially important if the rate of highway construction can not keep pace with the growth in the number of autos. In many urban areas this has been the case often based on the simple reality of the unavailability of and/or high price of land for highways or of the lack of financing. (Though this is an exacerbated example, the Los Angeles auto population essentially doubled whereas road construction grew at about 6%.) The number of cars per worker increased from .841 to .865 or 2.4%; even with the explosive growth in the number of workers, the U.S. was still able to narrower the gap between the number of workers and vehicles they used. The disturbingly real possibility of achieving the ratio of one auto per worker was nearer realization. Also during this period, those who drove alone to work increased by 8.8%, those who carpooled decreased by 6.3% and those who took public transportation dropped by 1.1%, while the number of workers at home increased by .7%.

What did this auto explosion cost Americans? In 1980 the national Total Cost of User-operated Transportation (i.e. private) was $ 214.88 billion and in 1990, $ 423.98 billion – thus increasing 92.4%. The average cost of private transportation per worker per annum in 1980 was $ 2,224 and $ 3,594 in 1990 for a 61.6% increase. The Total Cost of Purchased Local Transportation (i.e. public) increased during the same period from $ 4.79 to $ 8.916 billion or 86% while its average cost per worker per annum increased from $ 776 to $ 1,469 or 89.3%. The Consumer Price Index between 1980 and 1990 rose 58.6%. For an individual worker in this decade the real cost of operating a private car slightly outstripped the CPI (3%) while the cost of public transportation far outpaced the rate of consumer inflation (30.7%). Thus during the 80's the escalating cost of transportation increased 45% more for public transportation than for private.

The decade of the "Reagan Revolution" also saw real growth in American poverty. Both the raw number and the percent of poor people in the population rose respectively from 29.3 to 35.7 million and from 12.9% to 14.2%. Almost 16 million or 6.7% of all poor Americans were African-Americans or Hispanics – the majority of America's urban poor. The official poverty level for a family of four in 1990 was $ 13,900, so the cost of operating an automobile or using mass transit (if one could take it to work) cut deeply into the budget of a poor family. The cost of transportation as a percent of deposable income obviously drops as wealth increases. Thus the economic barrier to the fundamental necessity of getting to work meant that an increasing portion of the impoverished population would continue to find itself separated from places of work or it would finance transportation at the expense of some other necessity.

Employment discrimination, which therefore means economic discrimination, can occur through the seemingly modest issue of geographic access employed as a work barrier. It results from the spiralling cost of public transportation or the substantial initial capitalization required to finance private transportation. It is inherently weighted against the poor and adds to their increasing economic disenfranchisement and ghettoization. With the cost of public transportation rising faster than both the CPI and real wages, ridership falls off at an increasing rate. This therefore adds further pressure to the need for fare hikes, which when implemented again eliminates more riders and strains the financial health of the system more etc. Thus the typical urban public transportation dilemma of a positive feedback cycle in a negative mode is born. Since economic accessibility to public transportation is increasingly eliminated due to its escalating prices, it throws the burden of transportation of the already fiscally disadvantaged into the realm of their own private responsibility. To own or operate an auto requires a substantial initial capital outlay – a real threshold which often lies beyond the means of the poor. Cars seem inexpensive in America, especially used cars; but, if one is poor, to purchase and maintain an auto is not "cheap". Accordingly if poor people can not cross the financial barrier of obtaining transportation, they are then trapped physically within a narrow economic and geographic range of work possibilities. If one can not get to places where better paying jobs are found due either to financial difficulties or to the simple fact that public transportation may not adequately serve them, then it leaves one marooned and isolated within a constricted realm of those economic opportunities available in the city – "Oh mama, can this really be the end/to be stuck inside of Mobile with the Memphis blues again."[1] If one can not afford to get to work, one, therefore, can not work. The geography of opportunity – the real space of available employment – relates directly to the opportunity of transportation.

Remember that Americans are more willing to pay a substantially higher share of their deposable personal income for private than for public transportation. Americans consistently resist spending more for improved mass transit while willfully supporting highway construction through bond issues and toll collections. In a sense America has developed another type of economic Darwinism created out the seemingly simple task of overcoming the physical, geographic, hurdle of access to the workplace. This dilemma for the poor is seen in the issue of transportation availability. America is a big country with lots of land onto which it can spread its urban form. And America continually votes with its wheels for the freedom of individual movement at the expense of the health of the commonwealth. Though not necessarily planned consciously as such, by the tangible act of placing business nodes, mini-urban cores, beyond the physical and monetary reach of increasingly large numbers of urban dwellers, the American business culture is helping condemn cities to be strictly two class societies – the rich and the poor. In this kind of environment they can and often do resort to highly antagonistic behavior. Whereas the rich have the ability to move freely in and out of cities, the poor through lack of transportation are even more trapped in their world of poverty. With eroding urban tax bases and revenues, city, state and federal government have less capacity to stop the decay of their constituent urban world. Furthermore, as more Interstate Highway beltlines are completed or new ones added around cities, more Edge Cities will develop with its concomitant urban erosion. Thus the image develops of a city spinning like a top and by the law of centrifugal force, its wealthier/healthier people and physical riches seem to be thrown – whirled – to the urban perimeter. No economic, political nor social centripetal force is strong enough to keep the city together. "Things fall apart; thecenter cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."[2]

Though Tysons Corner, Va. at the intersection of I-495 and Highway 123 (Dolly Madison Blvd) is a well known and often cited model of an Edge City. It remains, however, a single instance in the atypical environment of the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area. Atlanta, Ga. is frequently cited as one of the best metropolitan examples of this type of urban phenomenon – a social/economic dynamic with a large magnitude of expansive cultural fragmentation. Atlanta's suburban explosion essentially started in the late 1950's, accelerated greatly in the

[1] Dylan, Bob. *Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again*. New York, Columbia Records, 1971.

[2] Yeats, William Butler. *The Second Coming*. 1921.

60's and 70's and blossomed fully during the 80's economic boom. Simultaneously during the 70's and 80's:

• the Atlanta metropolitan government failed to legislate strict planning/zoning laws regarding development of commercial/business properties;

• the Interstate Highway system through and around the city matured;

• the city built the first sections of its mass transit rail system but failed to coordinate and link its future with strict regional development plans;

• a large influx of corporate and personal wealth from the North occurred in the form of relocated business facilities and personnel;

• a large number of new jobs were created, which enlarged the area's work force and its support economy;

• Atlanta's economy shifted, along with the rest of the country's, from manufacturing to service; and

• the city needed and decided to enlarge and move further away from its center one of its prime economic nodes, the international airport.

In Atlanta one finds established and growing mini-urban cores along the I-285 beltline corridor, the I-75 and I-85 North/South corridors, and the US 19/400 and 19/9 (Roswell Rd.) arteries. A large, maturing alternate city core within the I-285 beltline is also found around the Peachtree Mall area – another burgeoning downtown. The unusual abstract planning concept and realization of Atlanta's double urban core is not unlike Manhattan's double core of Mid-town and Down- town. The one large difference, however, is that New York's two cores are connected with a dense urban fabric, not a semi-suburban one of single family houses or low density apartments.

The most troublesome aspect of physically accommodating Edge Cities is making the extended infrastructure connections economically feasible. After the high initial capitalization expenditure, the cost of physically extending infrastructure systems works on a slowly ascending curve, not a straight line. As distance increases, the price accrues geometrically. Power, water, sewer, roads, telephone etc. can be paid for by public and/or private money (user based fees), but one fundamental problem that does not seem surmountable is providing public transit to these nodes. The ridership of buses to these areas does not adequately finance the cost of these routes; and as public money heavily subsidizes these bus systems, their substantial financial losses can not be justified. Also on these business node bus routes, the ridership/time-frequency-use threshold required to merit an active enough schedule to make them viable means of primary work transportation for urban dwellers is not met. If the bus does not run frequently enough or at appropriate times to the correct places, then one must use an auto to get to work. The cost of providing rail mass transit to existing "satellite cores" is obviously prohibitive, which is not to say that planning their routes to coincide with anticipated points for future Edge City development can not be conceived and executed.

Atlanta regional planners are trying to plan for the future but voters seem to have a different vision of how the greater Atlanta metropolitan area should develop. Planners see the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) extending its lines into Gwinnettt County and across the Chatahoochee River into Cobb Country; the voters in both counties have defeated efforts to extend MARTA.

The "official" public reason for defeating these transportation initiatives is the cost to taxpayers. Indeed the costs are high. I would suggest that the hidden agenda for stopping MARTA is essentially racist. White, middle class Atlantans do not want to open up their communities publicly to the "kind" of people who *have* to use public transportation – poor, urban African- Americans. And in addition to that fear, they do not want to be forced to pay for MARTA as well.

It seems as though a kind of "transportation economic Darwinism" is occurring in Atlanta and other cities with similar situations. If one can afford private transportation, then one has acquired the minimum necessary stake in the free enterprise system to be accepted by those who determine that the place for their best business/economic future lies beyond the central city. If one can afford to buy into the physical arrangement of this economic system, then one can participate in it – "if you can pay, you can play". To be financially able and responsible enough to own and operate an auto means that one inherently subscribes, at least through the force of economic necessity, to the philosophy of the freedom of the individual at the expense of the commonwealth. It is a bleak view, but one must not forget that the subtle power of cultural racism combined with the Capitalist spirit of rugged American individualism and self-reliance gives great strength to America's love and use of the automobile.

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