

Divergence of Canadian and American Cities

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Abstract

The article outlines the evolution of Urban Geography approaches to the cities and elaborates the idea of the cities as multi spatial "bodies". Further on it compares the development of Canadian and American cities and points out the main differences, mainly those regarding the theme of sustainability.

Introduction

The majority of the Earth's population lives in cities. It has been so since the Industrial Revolution and the trend does not seem to be fading out. On the contrary, North America as a representative of one of the most technologically developed parts of the world naturally copies this trend - the percentage of the population living in cities has reached 80%. No wonder that people became fascinated by cities and created many disciplines trying to describe what has now become the natural habitat for human beings.

One of the first geographers to deal with cities on a scientific level was the German geographer, Walter Christaller, who in 1933 laid the groundwork for his famous "central place theory" (de Blij, Murphy, 258). Christaller's work was based on careful field observation and mathematics. He created a model which took into consideration the hierarchy of settlements and their service areas. Since the 1950s a large number of articles have been published in which geographers have attempted to refine Christaller's model. Christaller's main contribution was the stimulus he gave to urban geography (de Blij, Murphy, 260).

In the 1920s the Chicago School of Urban Geography was also dealing with models, this time models that described the inner morphology of cities (see Fig.1). These models were based mainly on social status and class distinction of the individual parts of the city and distribution of residential and industrial areas. The models were based on comparison of large American cities and in time they grew in number. The initial Burgess' "Concentric model" was replaced by more advanced (though not always necessarily more accurate) Hoyt's "Sector model" in the 1930s. In the 1940s though, even Hoyt's model was replaced by Harris' and Ullman's

"Multiple Nuclei model" based on the notion that the traditional Central Business District (CBD) no longer played so dominant a role in American cities (de Blij, Murphy, 261).

Although these models could have been successfully applied to modern American cities, with the dawn of post-modernism it became obvious to some urbanists that even the Multiple Nuclei model is no longer accurate enough to describe the growing post-modern cities with all their spatial-structural complexities. The post WWII era can be characterized by the baby boom and massive sub-urbanization, i.e. rapid population dispersal to outer suburbs. Two key factors played a crucial role in this dispersal - land price and, unlike the 1930s when streetcar network was flourishing, the spread of the freeway network. The new outer cities in the suburban area became partially independent of the strong CBD of the central city which led to the creation of the so-called "urban realms", described as: "spatial components of the metropolis of the 1990s, each a separate and distinct economic, social, and political entity within the larger urban framework" (de Blij, Murphy, 262). The new "Urban Realms model" includes the CBD, central city, new downtown and suburban downtown (Hartsborn, Muller, 375). These processes were first observed in Los Angeles, which became an archetype of fast developing American cities. There is general agreement that the fastest growing American cities are developing in a manner similar to Los Angeles, characterized by acute fragmentation of the urban landscape (Guinness, Nagle, 82). Since the landscape resembles the board for a keno game (an American game of chance similar to bingo), this post-modern approach became known as Keno capitalism (see Fig.2).

Apart from this "scientific" approach based on models, there was yet another approach that became influential. In 1960 Kevin Lynch published a book entitled *The Image of the City*. This book is until today one of the principal and most influential books in the study of cities. Lynch's method of studying the city form and "look of the city" includes two basic principles of modern urban geography: systematic examination/observation and interviewing a sample of citizens.

On first sight it may look that there is no considerable difference between American and Canadian cities. Yet a second look may reveal that the contrary is true. Canada is sometimes viewed as a little brother of the USA, or rather the 51st state (e.g. "Children of a Common Mother" is inscribed on the Peace Arch at the westernmost crossing between Canada and the USA). But the history of both countries quite different until WW II. It is generally perceived that since then there has been an era of convergence. Surprisingly, in case of cities, it is exactly the opposite.

Despite the different history, political influence and approach to land ownership, the landscape of the USA and Canada before the Second World War looked very similar. The notable exception was, and still is, Quebec, the main differences being caused by the Napoleonic code implemented in Quebec's legal system. Not even the strong ties with Britain and relative conservatism (compared to the USA) in urban design slowed down the penetration of the Enlightenment and were able to cause major differences in the regular 600 by 300 feet grid in Canada. Yet, the differences in urban design between both countries have grown stronger since WW II (Condon 2004). In my opinion there are several reasons to that.

If we take into account all the aspects shaping the city, we can talk about it in dimensions. The 2D (two dimensional) city in this approach would be the layout of the city. Comparing the layout of several American and Canadian cities, Patrick M. Gordon of UBC (University of British Columbia in Vancouver) noted two significant differences. First was the density. It might be the physical conditions (namely the climate) which can be "blamed" for this; but since 90% of all Canadians live within 120 km north of the 49th parallel (which forms much of the boundary with the USA), they tend to care about space much more than Americans. This fact is also projected into the economic reality - the price of land. The "hunger" for land in Canadian metropolitan areas is so high that prices have risen in some places (notably Vancouver CMA) by 400% since WWII. In some parts of the USA (e.g. St. Louis) the trend is just the opposite. The second difference Gordon points out is the per capita amount of freeways which is considerably smaller in Canada than in the USA. Moreover, Gordon puts these two figures in correlation and comes to a conclusion which supports his initial hypothesis that the more freeway km per capita the city has, the more visible is the fall of the downtown. It also means that the bigger the fall in land price, the lower the density is. Gordon compares St Louis, the city with the highest freeway per capita density, with Vancouver, the only city in North America which has no freeway leading to the CBD (Wynn, Oak 1992), and comes to shocking numbers.

The most striking, and from the above also the most visible feature of American cities, is the urban sprawl. It may seem that urban sprawl came into existence in the USA with the emergence of an extensive freeway system after The National Defense Highway Act of 1953. In reality, urban sprawl in the USA was "born" more than a decade earlier in Nassau County, New York, where a new town with 17,000 houses was built. The town, called Levittown, became the first example of urban sprawl as we understand it today. The paradox is that Levittown was built as a planned community with infrastructure and the size of its lots was closer to today's

suburbs in Canada rather than to larger lots in new US suburbs. Urban sprawl, the phenomenon of “consuming” land on the expense of arable land, is present not only in the USA, but also in Canada, although in the USA the more dangerous alternative – the “low-density sprawl” – prevails, whereas in Canada the “ribbon development” between two cities is more popular.

Although the freeway density and the price of land are very important and valuable indicators, they are not the only aspects and certainly not the only visible differences between Canadian and American cities. Density of population is influenced also by the type of dwelling situated on the lot, which inevitably creates also the third dimension of the city - 3D.

The third dimension is one of the most notable ones. The vertical variability mainly of the CBD is noticeable from long distances and hence becomes an integral part of every city's image. Yet, in my opinion, it has not been of equal importance in the USA and Canada. The Skyline of Canadian cities has been cherished and valued greatly since the 1970s and almost every major Canadian city has its notable icon such as the CN Tower in Toronto, the Harbour Center in Vancouver, or the Calgary Tower in Calgary. Vancouver is particularly proud of its skyline set against the mountain scenery, so that it has become a symbol of the city that advertises it worldwide. Vancouver also protects this panorama by careful zone planning. As for American cities, there is a difference. The largest cities such as New York and Chicago have a very similar approach as the Canadian ones, and especially New York is trying hard to amend its skyline by a notable structure since there has not been one since the tragedy of 9/11. Yet apart from New York, Chicago with its Sears Tower, San Francisco with the Golden Gate Bridge and St. Louis with its Arch, there are hardly any notable buildings or structures in American cities that make their downtowns uniquely identifiable and distinguishable from each other.

The spatial structure of the city seems to be spread into three dimensions. But taking into account present-day physics and philosophical approaches, there must be more dimensions to be taken into account. If the three dimensions create the outer visualization and the structure of the city, then the constant change, or dynamism through time, would be the fourth dimension. And it does not stop there. There are a number of other factors that shape cities, namely economy. Those who control the flow of capital (they are usually called the gatekeepers or stakeholders) influence the city on almost every level. In fact, they could be a separate dimension themselves. And what about the cultural influence, mixing global trends

with local - yet another dimension. The policy-makers, namely the municipalities, should not be forgotten as well - hence another dimension. Using this approach the number of possibilities would be limitless. I believe that it can easily be said that today's post-modern cities are multi-dimensional as far as their shaping and outer visualizations are concerned.

What is the difference between Canadian and American cities regarding these multiple dimensions? Canada and the USA are both immigration countries. Taking into account that the majority of immigrants tend to move to the cities, it is not surprising that all North American cities are multicultural. But there is a difference though. Whereas Canada is regarded as a multicultural country, where new immigrants keep their original identities and by taking the best from their identities they create the Canadian identity, in the USA the trend is the opposite and it is called transculturalism. There the newly naturalized citizen becomes an American in the first place and in the second place he/she can keep his/her previous national ties. The obvious manifestations are segregation, ghettoization and gated communities, processes very rare to Canadian cities, maybe with the notable exception of the Chinatown in Vancouver (which has a vivid historical background and newcomers do not tend to join it). In the USA though, ghettoization and gangs are still a visible problem even in Los Angeles, which is viewed by many as a prototype megalopolis for the USA. Gated communities are also on the rise there.

In Canada, on the contrary, several large cities have been flirting with the ideas of the so-called New Urbanism, which became popular in the 1990s, but came under strong criticism mainly in the US and was proclaimed by many a utopian concept. The main ideas of New Urbanism are sustainable cities, based on neighborhoods and reduction in transport (Cowan 2005). Toronto and mainly Vancouver attempted to use the principles of New Urbanism and implement them into their future plans. The multifunctional suburbs and community principles go well with the future plans of Vancouver. Only the future will tell whether they will be successful or not.

Americans do not tend to implement these principles to their cities. On the contrary, they follow the principles of *laissez-faire* and urban sprawl which make their cities more unsustainable. Only one positive feature becomes more visible in American cities - urban renewal or gentrification.

The mortgage crisis, as a result of the dense freeway system, long commuting distances, and especially the rising costs of oil brought dramatic change to the American philosophy of shaping cities and their understanding of them. Canadians are doing better, mainly because of the higher density of their residential areas caused mainly by reasonable

freeway system, better multicultural policy and sensitivity to nature and surrounding landscape.

To sum up, Canadian cities appear to be better prepared for future development. The most popular word for future development in general seems to be “sustainability”. The American cities, which were shaped mainly by the free market economy and vast spaces to conquer, are not too compatible with the concept of sustainability. It is mainly due to the large distances and immense freeway system. In comparison, Canada, where the freeway system is financed by the provinces not the federal government (unlike the USA), the per capita length of freeways is much lower. This has led to higher density of Canadian cities, hence lower dependence on cars and more intensive usage of public transport. The short distances also support the use of bicycles. In general, Canadian cities are closer to the concept of New Urbanism, which operates with the idea that the main facilities people use should be in walking or cycling distances from their homes. The higher density also adds to better energy efficiency of Canadian cities.

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Appendices

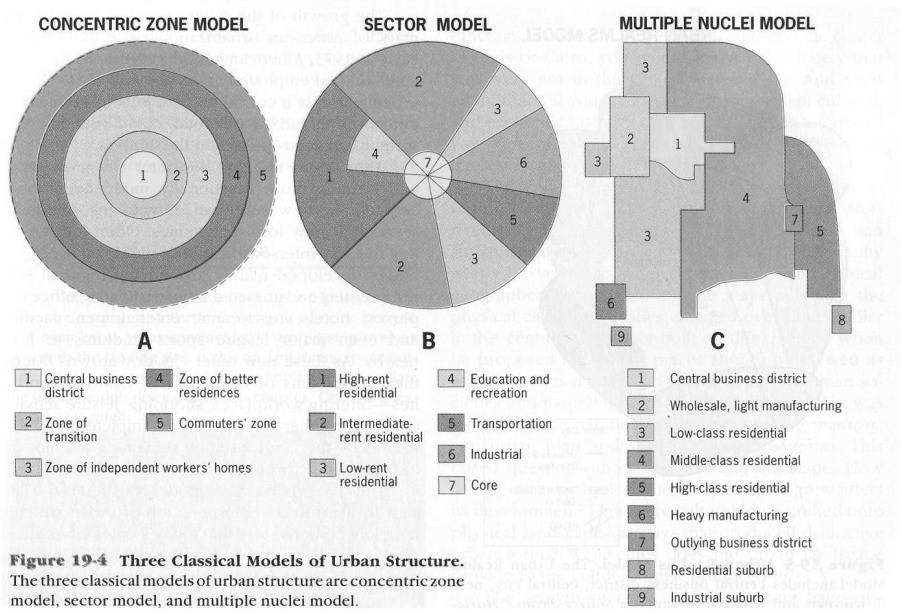


Figure 19-4 Three Classical Models of Urban Structure.
The three classical models of urban structure are concentric zone model, sector model, and multiple nuclei model.

Fig.1 Three Classical models of Urban Structure (de Blij, Murphy, 262)

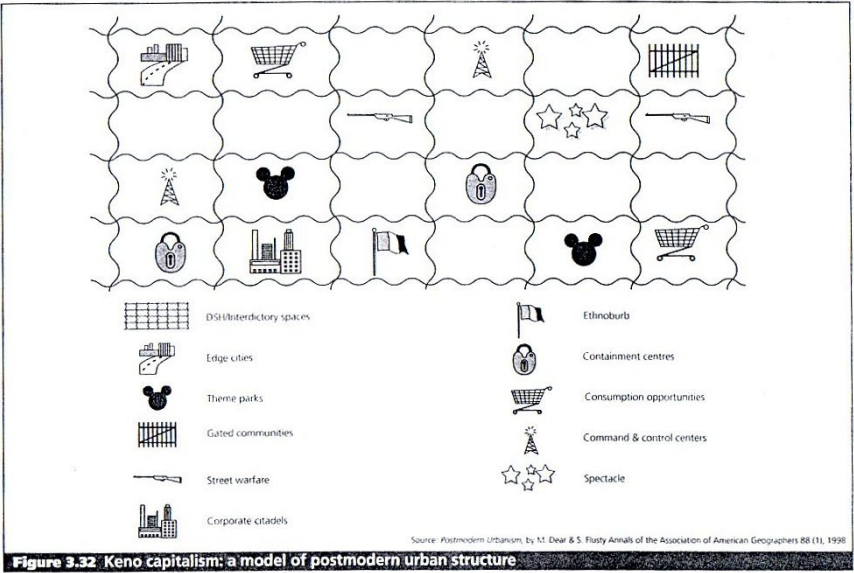


Figure 3.32 Keno capitalism: a model of postmodern urban structure

Fig. 2 Keno capitalism (Guinness, Nagle 2005, 84)

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