GEOFILE

Urban forms in the post-modern city

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Synopsis

Cities are vast, growing entities. They have great influence on the world we live in and how we live in it. Cities are in a constant state of change. Most modern cities in the developed world have their roots in the industrial revolution, but have changed since then in response to globalisation, deindustrialisation, the rise of the service economy, urban policy and the cumulative impact of millions of individual decisions over where and how people choose to live.

New urban forms are arising from this change from industrial city to postmodern city. They are the product of the evolving functions of the city and the developing needs and consumption patterns of the people that make them their home.

Key terms

Globalisation; productivity; cluster; urbanisation; urban form; cultural and heritage quarters; fortress developments; edge cities.

Learning objectives

By working through this **Geofile** you should:

- know the factors driving the transition from the industrial to the postmodern city in the developed world
- recognise the characteristics of the postmodern western city
- understand the emergence of contemporary urban forms in the postmodern western city: town centre mixed developments, cultural and heritage quarters, fortress developments, gentrified areas and edge cities.

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Urban change

Cities grow over time. They have their origins in an advantageous location for trade, which leads to the division of labour (specialisation and a resulting increase in productivity). The expansion of trade and industry in the industrial revolution led to the rapid expansion of cities in the developed world.

In the early stage of urbanisation, the magnitude of the perceived contrast in life chances between rural and urban areas determined the speed of urban population growth.

However, modern cities in the developed world now grow due to their ability to specialise and form clusters in tertiary and quaternary industries. Clusters of similar businesses act as a magnet for highly skilled employees, creating a concentration of activity which generates its own competitive advantage in a globalised economy.

Transition from industrial to postmodern city

Since the early 1970s, deindustrialisation, the rise of the service economy and urban policy have led to significant change in the form and function of cities. Deindustrialisation has removed the industrial function at the heart of many cities. Containerisation made inner city docks redundant. Industrial areas now require good access to motorways, rather than inner city docks and railheads. The global shift in manufacturing to emerging economies has reinforced this process of deindustrialisation.

Government policy in much of the developed world in the 1980s was to create a post-industrial economy (knowledge industries, services and investment in property). For example, the UK government set up the London Docklands Development Corporation to support the transition of the docklands area from a transport and industrial function to a service industry function. Modern governments see their role as supporting service industry clusters, rather than protecting domestic manufacturers. Furthermore, it was the rapid growth of the financial service industry after Big Bang – deregulation of London's banking industry – that turbocharged modern London. This process is ongoing.

Moreover, due to globalisation, cities now attract migrants from around the world, not just their rural hinterland. In the case of European cities, there has been large-scale post-colonial migration since the 1950s. However, all western cities have seen increasing connections and population exchange, as the global economy has become more integrated since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s.

These processes have created what geographers have called the postmodern western city. There are five main characteristics:

- fragmented urban form (piecemeal patterns, not the concentric circles or sectors of the industrial city)
- focused on service and knowledge than traditional industries
- eclectic and varied architecture
- flagship developments
- greater ethnic diversity, but also greater inequality and polarisation.

New urban forms

This is the context in which we can understand the development of new urban forms. Urban form means the characteristics of a built-up area. Such forms occur at different scales:

- edge cities can be larger than some standalone urban areas
- gentrified areas can make up a significant part of an urban area
- heritage quarters and town centre mixed developments can be as small as a few connected streets
- a fortress development might be as small as block of flats or group of houses.

Figure 1 The new extension of West Quay in Southampton is an example of a town centre mixed development
Source: Sterling Images/Shutterstock.com

Within this general pattern, there is considerable variation in scale across different cities and regions.

Town centre mixed developments

In the industrial city, town centres were often located at the peak land value intersection, because retailers were prepared to pay the highest rents for the best access to consumers. However, suburbanisation and counter-urbanisation have led to many of the wealthiest consumers living some distance from the city centre. Out-of-town shopping centres have been built on major transport routes around the city to meet the needs of these consumers. Further to this, the development of Internet shopping has increased the competitive pressures on retail. High parking charges, traffic congestion and perhaps some negative perceptions also weigh again town centres.

The aim of town centre mixed development is to draw consumers back through adding a diverse range of service functions. Examples include theatres, cinemas, bars and restaurants, attractive public spaces, seasonal attractions and street entertainment. In some locations, upmarket apartments, new offices and hotels as well as night clubs and casinos have been encouraged.

An example of a town centre mixed development is West Quay in Southampton (Figure 1). This shopping centre was originally built in 2000. In 2017 the development was updated and extended. The development also includes a multi-use outside space. This space becomes an urban beach in the summer and an ice rink at Christmas. It has also hosted 'pop-up' events such as an outdoor cinema and a maze.

Heritage and cultural quarters

Deindustrialisation has been the cause of a cycle of decline in many transitional zones in industrial cities. However, these zones often have strong heritages linked to previous industry that can act as a draw for tourism. Tourism-focused service industries can drive regeneration.

Other locations that have suffered decline have sought to rebrand as cultural quarters. This requires cultural production (making art, music, film, design) and/or cultural consumption (theatre, music, art galleries, festivals). Some locations are building on a cultural tradition, whereas others are creating a cultural identity from scratch. Cultural quarters can also thrive as part of the process of gentrification, especially if including clusters of small businesses specialising in social media and new creative technologies.

Cultural and heritage quarters can take advantage of flagship developments to put themselves on the map. A good example would be the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, which attracts tourists from across Europe (Figure 2). Other cultural attractions have also sprung up in Bilbao, building on and reinforcing this identity.

Fortress developments

A key characteristic of the postmodern city is greater ethnic diversity, but also greater inequality and polarisation. In London, the expansion of the European Union and growing emerging market wealth has driven more foreigners to Britain. Between 2001 and 2011, London's white population decreased by 6%, while the black and ethnic minority population grew by 55.5% (2001 census: non-white population of London 2.1 million; 2011 census: 3.3 million). Some new arrivals are very wealthy. Other migrant groups experience multiple deprivation.

High productivity in globally successful clusters can leads to very high salaries and fortunes for some groups. Other citizens in the same city can experience deprivation and poverty. The Equality Trust reported in 2013 that London has the greatest wealth inequality of all the UK's regions. The median annual average pay of someone in

Figure 2 The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is the anchor for the cultural quarter
Source: Iakov Filimonov/Shutterstock.com

the richest 1% (£72,459) is almost 15 times (14.8 times) that of someone in the poorest 1% (£9,009).

Fortress development are designed around security, protection, surveillance and exclusion. The wide differences in wealth can create fear of crime, gangs, minorities and the homeless, as well as a desire to be protected from the perceived dangers of the city. In countries like the USA and South Africa, where wealth differences are extreme, gated communities with armed security units, extensive CCTV and surveillance towers are not uncommon. In the UK fortress development is less obvious, but includes greater use of CCTV, railings around private space, extensive street lighting, sloped bus shelter seating and anti-homeless spikes in doorways and recesses, to prevent rough sleeping.

Figure 3 shows an example of a gated development in North London. The visible defence measures are limited to railings and security gates. However, CCTV cameras and 24-hour security guards keep the wealthy residents secure.

Gentrified areas

The success of clusters in modern cities can result in rapid and sustained increase in the value of property, and an associated rise in rents. This is because those benefiting from the success of the cluster will outbid other users for residential property near the cluster. Moreover, such areas will draw in commuters from a wide area, often putting strain on the capacity of transport infrastructure. This leads to increased commuting costs and a decline in the quality of the

Figure 3 A gated development on Bishops Avenue, London N2
Source: Fotomaton / Alamy Stock Photo

commuting experience. As a result, pioneer groups that wish to be close to the successful areas of a city, but can neither afford the high rents nor endure the difficult commute, will look for nearby areas where rents are much lower. Former transitional zones that have suffered from the decline of urban manufacturing and transport functions have often become the focus of such pioneer groups. Pioneer groups might include students and artists. Such groups can create an 'edgy' or artistic atmosphere, in which lifestyle businesses and nightlife

can thrive. This combination of an attractive atmosphere, lower rents and property prices can draw in young professionals and families seeking affordable property and an easier commute. Over time this process can lead to the piecemeal renovation and improvement of the urban area, as well as dramatic demographic change. Sometimes such change provokes resentment (Figure 4).

An example of a gentrified area is the Mission District in San Francisco. Historically, this area was home to the Latino population of the city. Its

Figure 4 Protests against gentrification on the wall of a derelict pub in Hackney Wick, East London
Source: Katharine Rose / Alamy Stock Photo

main employment was light industry, such as brewing and small retail units. Since the start of the tech boom in Silicon Valley, south of San Francisco, the population of the Mission has grown by 13%. This is less than San Francisco as a whole at 21%. However, the Latino population has declined from 50 to 40% in the last 15 years. There has been a big increase in the white population, from 32% in 2000 to 42% in 2014. Median incomes have risen from $15,000 in 1980 to $70,000 in 2013. The median house price was $200,000 in 1995, $100,000 less than the city median. Today the median house price in the Mission is $930,000, which is similar to the city average.

Figure 5 Los Angeles is surrounded by edge cities

Edge cities

Edge cities develop on the periphery of existing cities. They are associated with high levels of car ownership and affluence. They have their origins in a planning culture which decentralises the functions of a city over a large area, linking up these functions with motorways and other major road networks. For example, an edge city might develop around an airport, which has been located some distance from the main city. Edge cities have their own shopping, entertainment, schools and hospitals. As a result, the inhabitants of edge cities may rarely visit the original core city.

The original city boundaries of Los Angeles, USA are 30 km wide, containing a population of 4 million. However, the wider metropolitan area of Los Angeles is 100 km wide, with a population of over 18 million. Within this area there are estimated to be 29 edge cities, such as Anaheim, Santa Ana and Ventura (Figure 5).

Conclusion

Cities in the developed world have changed greatly due to deindustrialisation, globalisation, the rise of the service economy and the emergence of globally competitive business clusters. As a result, their form has become fragmented, rather than the patterns of the early 20th century. They are increasingly focused on service and knowledge, rather than traditional industries. The architecture can be eclectic, sometimes deliberately, with flagship developments. Socially they exhibit greater ethnic diversity but also greater inequality and polarisation. It is in this context that we can understand the emergence of contemporary urban forms. Retail and industrial decline drives the need for mixed town centre developments and cultural and heritage quarters. The success of new clusters leads to the wealth that makes gentrification necessary and possible, as well as fortress developments. In particular contexts, with plentiful land and cultural commitment to the car, edge cities are the logical extension of this process. We can expect urban forms to continue to evolve. Who can say what impact driverless cars, drones and artificial intelligence will have on our cities? However, we can be sure that there will be a response, because our urban areas have always evolved in response to social and economic change, and will continue to do so.

Focus questions

1. Rank the importance of the factors that caused the transition from the industrial to the postmodern western city.
2. How many of the characteristics of the postmodern western city can be found in the cities nearest to where you live?
3. Explain why contemporary urban forms have developed in the postmodern western city? Refer to examples.
4. Essay: Evaluate the relevance of these contemporary urban forms to the UK. Consider reasons for the pattern that you have identified. Use examples from this Geofile and other sources to illustrate your points.

Learning checkpoint

1. Summarise the characteristics of earlier industrial western cities.

2. List reasons for the decline of industrial aspects of western cities.

3. List the characteristics of the postmodern western city

4. Summarise the characteristics of each of the contemporary urban forms.

5. Summarise the reasons why each urban form has developed.

6. Make sure you have examples of each type of recent urban form

7. Use this writing frame to summarise the factors involved:

   Evaluate the factors leading to the emergence of contemporary urban forms.

   The most significant factor is…
   This factor is important in explaining the emergence of…
   Another important factors is…
   This factor can be seen to play a role in the emergence of…
   A less important factor is…
   This factor has played a minor role in the emergence of…
   Overall therefore the most important factors in the emergence of contemporary urban forms are…

Websites

The Academy of Urbanism Journal and resources provide interesting articles on new urban forms and contemporary planning debates.
Click here

Ta city is a blog site by Oli Mould – Lecturer in Human Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London. It covers social and planning change in London, which can help you explore its cultural geography of London.
Click here

A blog that asks whether London is postmodern. It references architecture, the economy, art and culture.
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