

The Playground City

*In affluent parts of the world, a
new, ephemeral kind of urban
center is taking shape, catering
to the nomadic rich and the
restless, rootless young.*

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CITIES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN about change. We may now be witnessing the emergence of a new kind of urban place, populated largely by non-families and the nomadic rich. This “playground city” may become the prototype for advanced countries in the 21st century. San Francisco, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, and parts of New York already serve as playground cities. Unlike the imperial capital of the 19th century, which administered a vast empire and extracted riches from it, or the commercial city of the 20th century, which thrived by trading goods, the playground city prospers by providing an alternative lifestyle to a small sector of society.

The playground city's relationship to its surrounding region and the wider world is symbiotic. It feeds off the wealth generated elsewhere while providing a stage where the affluent can spend their wealth most fashionably. Playground cities have developed in part because most industrial, commercial, and service functions are now more economically performed elsewhere: in suburbs, exurbs, and the developing world. In virtually every critical field—from manufacturing to financial and business services—employment and even headquarters functions have increasingly moved out of cities. The digital revolution has accelerated this process, allowing most of the primary centers for information industries—software, telecommunications equipment, and computers—to locate outside metropolitan areas, or even the country. High-end services, the supposed linchpin of “global city” economies, have also continued to disperse, not only in America but in Europe, Japan, and developing parts of East Asia.

Having lost the economic and demographic initiative to the hinterlands, cities have two alternatives. They can work to become more competitive in terms of jobs by attracting skilled workers and middle-class families, or they can become playgrounds for the idle—and not so idle—rich, the restless young, and tourists. Many cities seem to be adopting the latter strategy, regarding tourism, culture, and enter-

tainment as “core” assets, just as Venice and Florence did years ago, and Las Vegas and Orlando do today.

Berlin is an interesting case. Having largely failed to meet its aspirations to once again be a world business center, the city now celebrates its bohemian community as its primary *raison d'être*, apart from its important role as a national capital and cultural repository of much of its nation's checkered history. Berlin's economic life is defined not by the export of goods and services, not by the provision of headquarters for agglomerations of major companies, but by galleries, shops, a lively street life, and a growing tourist trade. The mayor, Klaus Wowereit, has called Berlin “poor but sexy.”

In a global economy, only certain cities—Paris, London, San Francisco—can be successful playground cities. Berlin, Vancouver, Chicago, Rome, and Montreal might also belong on the list. Given their reservoirs of entertainment venues, cultural institutions, and “hip” districts, they may be able to attract a sufficiently large customer base of tourists, young professionals, and older affluent residents and visitors hoping to experience a more diverse way of life. But what about old industrial cities such as Manchester, Cleveland, and Detroit, whose civic leaders believe that cultivating a “cultural” image will lure skilled workers and affluent singles? Subsidies for this kind of develop-

ment—lofts, restaurants, clubs, and museums for sizable gay and single populations—have sometimes succeeded in creating at least the appearance of an urban renaissance. But in the long run, this form of culturally based growth will do little to halt the decline of these cities. A city such as Pittsburgh has transformed itself from a gritty industrial center and has become somewhat more attractive, but at the same time, it continues to lose population and jobs. Pittsburgh may be nicer, but it is also less relevant.

Michigan governor Jennifer Granholm's "cool cities" initiative promotes the development of the arts, hip districts, and downtown living. Yet during the last few years, Michigan's "cool cities"—Ann Arbor, Kalamazoo, Jackson, Grand Rapids, and even Lansing—have experienced some of the most severe job losses in the nation. Under the leadership of its young "hip-hop" mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick, Detroit continues to fall toward what former Comerica Bank chief economist David Littman has called "a graveyard spiral."

Cleveland and Philadelphia have likewise opted for "playground" strategies, with the usual assortment of convention centers, performing arts centers, museums, arts festivals, and central city lofts. But what are the results? Cleveland's widely praised attempt to become fashionable has not prevented the city from entering

the 21st century with the highest percentage of people living in poverty of any large American city. Its population and job base continue to decline almost inexorably. According to Wharton real estate professor Joseph Gyourko, Philadelphia's much ballyhooed Center City "resurgence" represents a more substantial success. But the downtown glitz has not halted the continued decline of other urban neighborhoods, or the exodus of jobs—and the middle class—to the suburbs. And new lofts and condominiums are built just a short walk from neighborhoods where thousands of abandoned buildings stand ready to collapse. In places such as Philadelphia, downtowns serve as "Potemkin cities" that persuade outsiders and suburbanites that the city is still habitable and worth visiting. But those who study the urban condition understand the limitations of this strategy. "Downtown has done great, but it does not represent the rest of Philadelphia," Gyourko says. "That's our story—a bright spot where fundamental decline is still in play."

Even at their best, cities such as Cleveland and Philadelphia will not be able to compete with the likes of San Francisco, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, London, Berlin, and Paris for the dollars of young professionals, the nomadic rich, and tourists. "There are simply not enough yuppies to go around," says demographer William Frey. "Cool

city” wannabes are unlikely to be anything other than “me too” copies of hipper, more alluring places. It would make more sense for these cities to work on the basics—public safety, education, regulations, taxes, sanitation—so they could attract middle-class entrepreneurs and cost-conscious homeowners. Amenities will follow once there are consumers. For example, the focus on crime reduction in New York during the 1990s spurred a resurgence in virtually every sector of the economy. This helped attract parts of the middle class amenable to urban living—the young professional, the childless couple—to the city. The next—and even greater—challenge will be creating affordable housing and better schools for these people as they get older, and perhaps have children.

The dilemma for playground cities lies in how far they want to go in this direction and how dominated they want to be by the amenity-tourism economy. A San Francisco, with its mild weather, spectacular setting, and lovely hinterland, may be able to go all the way towards becoming a kind of ephemeral paradise. It can attract enough of the best and the brightest—as well as tourists and short-time residents—to maintain its amenity regime. The question is more difficult for New York or Chicago, which, although attractive as playgrounds, must also supply jobs and opportunities to much larger and more diverse populations. Being a playground

alone may not be enough for them in the long term.

Such great, amenity-rich cities as Chicago and New York must ask themselves, “What kind of city do we want to become?” Art galleries, clubs, bars, and boutiques undeniably make cities fun, but they will not convince middle-class families—and most businesses—to commit to a city for the long term. Relying on the culturally curious, these cities could be destined to become little more than theme parks for adults. They will have, oddly enough, more in common with resort towns like Las Vegas or Orlando than with the traditional, broad-shouldered cities of the past—or even with cities such as Los Angeles, Houston, Phoenix, Shanghai, or Mumbai, whose growth remains grounded in activities such as trade, manufacturing, and trade in technological services.

Even the artistic potential of a culturally centered metropolis may prove severely limited. In the past, achievement in the arts grew as a by-product of economic and political dynamism. Athens first emerged as a great bustling mercantile center and military power before it astounded the world in other fields. The extraordinary cultural production of other great cities—Alexandria, Venice, Amsterdam, London, New York—rested upon similar nexuses between the aesthetic and the mundane. History shows that even the most culturally rich cities cannot thrive long when defi-

cient in families, a strong middle class, and upwardly mobile working people. Inevitably, decline will set in, as it did in late imperial Rome, 17th-century Venice, 18th-century Amsterdam. The future of contemporary cities such as Seattle, San Francisco, and Boston, which have low percentages of children and high housing costs, is likewise in doubt.

Some of this boils down to political dynamics. A city that does not have to rely on providing upward mobility to its working class families tends to focus on marginal issues such as gay marriage, the construction of iconic art museums, and 'nanny' issues such as smoking curbs, rather than on more critical problems such as improving schools, building new infrastructure, or promoting entrepreneurial growth. Perhaps most important, an economy oriented to entertainment, tourism, and "creative" functions provides opportunities for only a small slice of the population. Following such a course, it is likely to evolve ever more into a city composed of cosmopolitan elites, a large group of low-income service workers, and a permanent underclass.

To retain an important role in the future, a city needs upwardly mobile people whose families and businesses identify with the place. A great city is more about clean and workable neighborhoods, thriving business districts, and functioning schools than massive cultural buildings or

hipster lofts. The great work of cities is best accomplished in small steps, block by block. It confirms a sense of place and permanence. Rooted in ephemera, a city can only lose its historic relevance, or at best fade into graceful senescence, a dowager whom everyone admires but no one takes seriously anymore.