Identifying urban attractors: An empirical study of anchors that seed the formation of a community

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Abstract

OBJECTIVE:

This study was designed to identify urban attractors responsible for bringing groups of people to live and work together forming a society in an urban spatial environment throughout the history of human development.

METHODS:

The study was conducted largely through the review of literature in history, geography, review of maps, housing price data for specific areas and general books on lifestyle patterns of past cultures.

RESULTS :

There are broadly two kinds of attractors :

Type 1: Attractors which brings people to an urban space

Type 2: Attractors which keeps people within that urban zone.

Contrary to the general belief that water is the prime attractor for the formation of groups, the study finds that safety is the top attractor for group formation. There was safety from predators as a group, food gathering and hunting became easier and that became the main motivator for humans to work and live together.

Safety remains the top attractor in a modern urban society and prices of houses change drastically irrespective of the plot size as a direct relation to crime level.

Availability of water is the prime attractor once safety is attained. Water is the creator of wealth and in modern times, this attractor is replaced with the availability of jobs.

The second kind of attractors are availability of educational institutions, recreation and entertainment zones for self and family. This includes schools, malls, restaurants, parks and sports facilities.

Another major attractor which keeps people in its zone is the type and availability of transportation which includes the availability of quality transportation networks.

CONCLUSION :

Type 1 attractors are common irrespective of the geographical locations whereas Type 2 attractors can vary based on the local laws, cultural backgrounds and priorities of the group populations. Identifying a specific attractor for the urban zone can help local law enforcers, town planning specialists and social activists in improving its value and prioritize budget allocations.

Keywords: urban attractors, urban anchors, community development

1. Introduction

Humans have grouped together to form communities, villages and cities for millions of years. It is one of the major evolutionary traits that made humans go up to the top of the food chain. Individuals were linked together within a community by having common goals, values and belief systems with each individual contributing something for the survival of the group.

Survival of the group ensured the survival of the individual and his descendants- it is a two way symbiotic relationship between the individual and the group. The issues faced by Babylonian civilization are more or less similar to the issues we face now in terms of safety, food security, ease of transportation etc.

It is therefore a good question to ask as to what attracts an individual to join a group? What attracts an individual to remain in a group? Urbanism is just a group of individuals deciding to stay together in a common geographical area.

2. Early Communities

Around 100,000 BC, home-sapiens started moving out from African landmass into Europe and other parts of the world. This movement was done in small groups as there was safety and security in groups.

The start of a community has its origins in group hunting, keeping fires burning consistently throughout the winter months, gathering fire resources, forging for food, self defense from animals and other humans etc. All these activities required multiple persons working together which gradually developed into self supporting communities. People gradually settled to semi permanent settlements with less movements. Semi-permanent settlements would be the building-blocks of built up communities and the improvement of agrarian homes.[4]

It's no coincidence that primary civilizations showed up in major waterway valleys where floodplains provided enriched soil for agriculture and the waterways provided easy transportation. These foundation civilizations provide the initial complexity in urbanization with hierarchical social order and distribution of skills and wealth.

One important point to note is that these early civilizations were bound together by religion and its beliefs and systems and rules. Religion gave a framework of convictions and behaviour patterns and a meaning to one's existence. Individuals were attracted to others sharing the same beliefs and discovering common grounds and reasons for staying in the same geographical area.[4]

Grouping on a common religion gave safety which was the most coveted freedom an individual could achieve.

The primary reason of the formation and success of an urban development lies in its ability to provide safety and security to its inhabitants.

3. Safety and Housing Prices

With the development of mega cities, an important aspect to look at the reasons for the growth of certain areas verses the decline of other areas.

Cities in China are on a gargantuan growth but if one looks are middle eastern countries of Syria or Iraq, once flourishing cities are lying in ruins – millions of people are abandoning these area leaving everything and going to other areas as refugees. Key aspect of the difference between China and Iraq is the lack of safety.

Fear of crime is a typical feature of large cities that tend to affect property prices. The study employs hedonistic price modeling to estimate the impact of several measures of fear of crime while controlling for property and neighborhood characteristics.[5]

Perceived fear of safety is known to decrease property prices. Prices get discounted heavily in areas vulnerable to burglary or assault even if the buyers themselves were never victims of the crime. Property prices are therefore expected to reflect these various degrees of safety. This means that individuals that are looking for a new area to live, they tend to avoid (if they have enough resources) places where they run greater risk to be victimized or places that are perceived as less safe than the rest of the city. Safety, together perceived safety – and how they affect the appraisal of property prices. [5]

Of course, residential prices are dependent on a variety of factors like access to educational institutes, transportation, recreation, perceived value of the neighborhood etc. But all these factors override the perceived fear of crime and violence that could happen to the individual. A good example is the varying prices of the Michigan Rust Belt of Detroit residential areas- there are counties with abandoned houses which nobody wants due to neglect from the municipality and lack of any security from the police force. Once safety is assured, prices will vary depend on attributes like neighborhood value, schools, transportation etc.

Most of the international evidence shows that crime (and/or fear of crime) or total breakdown of safety like a war tanks property prices. The abandoned cities of war torn countries with refugees rushing to borders for safety are stark reminders of how much safety plays a role in urban development.

4. Case Study

In late 80's, the Indian National Capital Region Planning Board, in its regional plan-2001, declared Gwalior, as possible alternative to ease the pressure of population in Delhi. Soon, about 2900 lakh square meters of land in Gwalior were earmarked for the project. The Madhya Pradesh government constituted the Special Area Development Authority , which built a network of more than 200km of inside roads, large six-lane arterial roads and sewage lines in the residential areas. A

water treatment plant was set up and 250 hectors were allotted for a new airport in Malipura.

This project has failed to take off inspite of massive investment in infrastructure, residential apartments, recreation areas etc. with complete support of government resources. **The primary reason for people reluctant to move here inspite of paying for their houses is the lack of safety and lack of transport.** The local people of certain community are very powerful and demand payment for moving into a house. Other forms of extortion and threats are common with the police unable or incapable of doing anything. The area is like the ravines of Chambal, where certain rural communities rule the roost. To understand the characteristics of an area, user perception and visibility are important parameters. [2]

One way to find the development of an area is to look at the distribution of transport points like bus-stops. [1] A google search on traffic pattern will show extremely sparse vehicle density with hardly any movement that mimics any development pattern. In fact, transportation is an issue in this area with the railway station and airport are 20km and 30km away, respectively. The nearest market and cinema hall are 12km away.

Satellite imagery another way to check the density of buildings in an area. [3] Even after 30+ years from the start of this project, a google earth map survey shows very limited apartments or any other large building projects that can be found. The density of constructed buildings is very low. Most plots are empty. Private builders like Sahara City and Mantri City have not got beyond constructing the boundary walls.

5. Conclusions

There are broadly two kinds of attractors:
Type 1: Attractors which brings people to an urban space

Type 2: Attractors which keeps people within that urban zone. Contrary to the general belief that water is the prime attractor for the formation of groups, the study finds that safety is the top attractor for group formation. There was safety from predators as a group, food gathering and hunting became easier and that became the main motivator for humans to work and live together. Safety remains the top attractor in a modern urban society and prices of houses change drastically irrespective of the plot size as a direct relation to crime level. Availability of water is the prime attractor once safety is attained. Water is the creator of wealth and in modern times, this attractor is replaced with the availability of jobs. The second kind of attractors are availability of educational institutions, recreation and entertainment zones for self and family. This includes schools, malls, restaurants, parks and sports facilities. Another major attractor which keeps people in its zone is the type and availability of transportation which includes the availability of quality transportation networks.

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