

We can be sure, however, that cities will remain the ground zero of convergence. Although forest clearance and export monocultures have played fundamental roles in the transition to a new geological epoch, the prime mover has been the almost exponential increase in the carbon footprints of urban regions in the northern hemisphere. Heating and cooling the urban built environment alone is responsible for an estimated 35 to 45 per cent of current carbon emissions, while urban industries and transportation contribute another 35 to 40 per cent. In a sense, city life is rapidly destroying the ecological niche—Holocene climate stability—which made its evolution into complexity possible.

Yet there is a striking paradox here. What makes urban areas so environmentally unsustainable are precisely those features, even in the largest megacities, that are most anti-urban or sub-urban. First among these is massive horizontal expansion, which combines the degradation of vital natural services—aquifers, watersheds, truck farms, forests, coastal eco-systems—with the high costs of providing infrastructure to sprawl. The result is grotesquely oversized environmental footprints, with a concomitant growth of traffic and air pollution and, most often, the downstream dumping of waste. Where urban forms are dictated by speculators and developers, bypassing democratic controls over planning and resources, the predictable social outcomes are extreme spatial segregation by income or ethnicity, as well as unsafe environments for children, the elderly and those with special needs; inner-city development is conceived as gentrification through eviction, destroying working-class urban culture in the process. To these we may add the socio-political features of the megapolis under conditions of capitalist globalization: the growth of peripheral slums and informal employment, the privatization of public space, low-intensity warfare between police

and subsistence criminals, and bunkering of the wealthy in sterilized historical centres or walled suburbs.

By contrast, those qualities that are most 'classically' urban, even on the scale of small cities and towns, combine to generate a more virtuous circle. Where there are well-defined boundaries between city and countryside, urban growth can preserve open space and vital natural systems, while creating environmental economies of scale in transportation and residential construction. Access to city centres from the periphery becomes affordable and traffic can be regulated more effectively. Waste is more easily recycled, not exported downstream. In classic urban visions, public luxury replaces privatized consumption through the socialization of desire and identity within collective urban space. Large domains of public or non-profit housing reproduce ethnic and income heterogeneity at fractal scales throughout the city. Egalitarian public services and cityscapes are designed with children, the elderly and those with special needs in mind. Democratic controls offer powerful capacities for progressive taxation and planning, with high levels of political mobilization and civic participation, the priority of civic memory over proprietary icons and the spatial integration of work, recreation and home life.

Mike Davis, "Who Will Build the Ark?"
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