

## **Technology and the City: Urban politics, Technology and the “Death” of Space in the digital age**

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American cities have evolved at breakneck speed, increasing in both size and technological power. As populations continue to increase in cities from suburban areas, technology has played a major role in making the urban area more organized and a desirable place to live. “Not only is telecommunications influencing where people live, work, socialize and shop, but it is also altering the kinds of activities that take place within the family home, the office and other workplaces, the classroom, financial institutions, and even within the automobile” (Kaplan, Wheeler & Holloway, 2009, p. 135). The Internet has proven to be one of the most utilized resources for urbanites, a system so efficient that even rural dwellers can take advantage of its benefits. However, some argue that technology has increased so rapidly that the physical space of the city is losing its value, therefore predicting the “death of the city.” After researching this hypothesis, this article concludes that the “death of the city” is false.

This article strives to encourage the use of technology within cities because of its positive influence on citizens’ political involvement. Citizens can access a number of sources in order to educate themselves on public policy and become involved in political organizations. These sources may include the Internet, media outlets and social networking sites such as Twitter or Facebook. This article will also attempt to illustrate that the death of the city is not eminent; rather, the death of physical restraints on resources because of distance is more probable. This is because technology has increased the ability of citizens to become more politically, socially and emotionally involved in issues pertaining to culture and society.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the city is the variety and abundance of opportunities available to its residents. “The city does not create a way of life on [sic] its own but rather provides the setting where any way of life, any cultural tradition, can intensify and re-create itself in a manner not possible in other settings” (Macionis and Parrillo, 2007, p. 218). Beyond the modern ease of interaction and current availability of physical avenues to be immersed within, the city has been a hub for human activity for thousands of years, with humble beginnings in challenging settings outside of America’s young lands.

Early cities were hubs of activity but limited in their economic and political achievements. “The earliest cities, such as Jericho and Catal Huyuk, were scattered, independent units, often linked by trade but not much more” (p. 55). However, vast urban spaces began to appear around 4000 B.C.E. in regions such as Mesopotamia, North Africa and the Americas. These cities began to have more influence throughout the region because of their ability to conquer neighboring lands. Perhaps the most well known empires in human history are that of Greece and the Roman Empire.

As the second millennium began to unfold, a new series of events began with a different economic system. “In the first few centuries of the second millennium C.E., a halting urban revival began. Slowly trade began to revive and the old feudal system began to break as a new merchant class gained power” (p. 55). Renaissance cities in Italy (Milan, Florence and Venice) are prime examples of this new class.

With the merchant class gaining more financial clout, people all over Europe flocked to cities in hope of a better life. Improvements in sanitation and health services created havens for the new populations and improved the quality of life for residents. Because of this phenomenon, immigration also increased to these areas. North America was soon a part of this revival. This

ultimately led to the rise of industrialization and capitalism, bringing about new waves of economic development to the country, which has led technology to the current level. While these two engines of industrialization and capitalism have brought opportunity and positive growth for many areas, urban development has run into quite a few problems as well.

One problem is that cities have not developed proportionally with their population. Nearly all the urbanized areas in the world that advance in population are in underdeveloped countries. This combination of poor resources, unsafe sanitary services and underserved citizens are a deadly trio for keeping a city impoverished. The lack of a technological resource base has also contributed to the inability for proper development in cities. "Even when the rich and poor coexist in the same areas within the metropolis, their social and economic networks are almost totally separated" (Kaplan, Wheeler & Holloway, 2009, p. 131).

As American cities continue to expand, technology has been one of the main components required for successful growth and development. One major impact of technology, particularly in advancing cities, is the widespread use of email. Citizens can now email distant friends and family in minutes. Corporate contacts can simultaneously conference call London and Tokyo. The technological possibilities within cities seem endless.

Nevertheless, some critics are wary that technology has diminished the value of the city itself. What good are skyscrapers and urban landscapes if citizens do not need to commute into the city to see them? If employees can work via computer from their living rooms, what will the future of the city hold? This article argues that the physical space of the city cannot be dissolved by the advent of technology because of the importance of the city throughout the history of human development.

Cities need to exist in order to facilitate the fiber optic cables necessary for such digital technology. While the Internet may exist in the digital space without a company, the actual power cannot. Because of these constraints with technology, citizens are actually brought closer together through networks and the ease of finding other individuals with common interests. The digital age has altered nearly every aspect of the American routine. Urban America would not be where it is in development and political power without the advantage of technology. This section discusses the development of contemporary society and how technology has facilitated positive change for American citizens. Rather than dissolving the value of the city as an aesthetic and architectural environment, technology instead enhances it. This change is healthy, particularly in regards to the traditional American workweek.

According to the August 2009 issue of "The Economist," three things happened in order to facilitate that change. "A shift in manufacturing to service industries, the growing number of women in the workforce, and the desire for flexibility by workers" ("Flexible Working," p.1). As more citizens become politically involved (from expansion and ease of the internet), workers are recognizing the advantages they may have with technology. The use of telecommunications makes it easier for workers to stay at home and not use a vehicle to travel to work. Combining technology within the urban city creates a more cohesive aspect to the city itself. Without the hassles of travel, there are fewer distractions within the company for businesses to deal with. Creating more efficiency within urban areas makes living easier for both businesses and employees.

Though technology has been used tremendously in constructing urban areas, this article defends the idea that technology will not destroy the physical city, nor can it take away from the citizen's ability to become politically involved in issues of their choosing. Technology and the

city are a marriage of opportunity in politics and personal growth for all citizens, regardless of class or political standing. Community organizers are beginning to surface in urban areas, giving a voice to the lower classes in a way not seen since the Progressive Era. Civilization has evolved for thousands of years towards a vision of urban spaces with the promise of a better life for all, with the city as the heart of the process. “Thenceforth, the story of civilization became the story of urban history” (Macionis and Parrillo, 2007, p. 220).

## References

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