

MILTON KEYNES:

MAKING A GREAT CITY GREATER

Commission Working Paper 19
What makes a great city?

Arup

Milton Keynes Futures 2050 Commission



Subject Arup submission to the MK Futures 2050 Commission

Date 2 December 2015

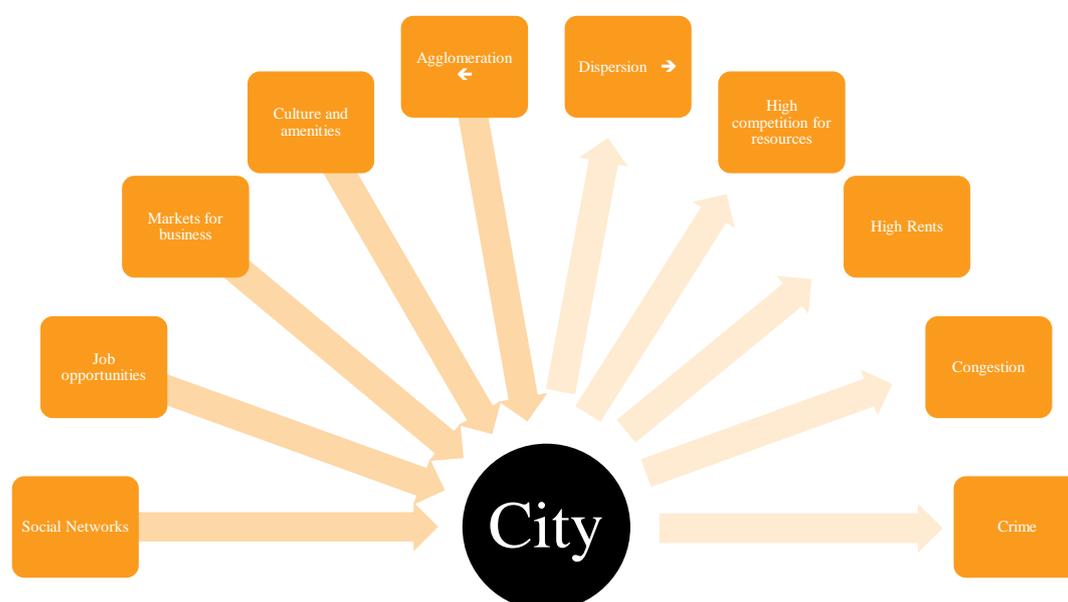
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What makes a great city?

Arup was asked by the MK2050 Futures Commission to present some thoughts on 'what makes a great city?' on Monday 2nd November. This paper summarizes points made at that session—in Arup's presentation and the conversations that followed. It is intended for submission as part of the Commissions' written evidence base.

A city is made up of many people, businesses and communities with often competing and contradictory needs. A great city is therefore different things to different people. The extent to which any city - even great ones - meet the needs of their different inhabitants will vary over time and between people.

Economists (in particular proponents of the so called 'New Economic Geography') say great cities are good at attracting people and businesses, because they offer many opportunities and allow people to share ideas and innovate. And, great cities must be good at overcoming the challenges that push people and businesses out, like congestion, pollution, and high costs of workers and property.



Success, then, looks different in different places. Nevertheless, there are a number of characteristics that are broadly associated with successful cities. A great city will be:

- A good place to do business
- A place people want to live
- Somewhere that can adapt to change
- A place with personality.

• **A good place to do business**

A great city is at, or close to, full employment. Everyone living there who wants work should be able to find work, and businesses that wish to locate there should be able to find the premises and workforce they need. This means a city needs to be well-connected, have appropriate land and business space, and skilled and talented labour.

Well-connected. Cities need to be connected to make the most of their density. This means public and private transport options that meet the wide range of needs for people to efficiently get around the city. The city also needs to be connected to other cities efficiently, so that businesses can trade and people can visit easily between them.

Appropriate land and business space. Successful cities need a good supply of land and premises which offer variety in terms of typology, price and quality. High property and office prices are often a sign of high demand, which is a good thing. But, when prices get too high, it can act as a “push” factor, encouraging businesses to leave the city. A great city will offer a mix of land and commercial space that fits the wide ranging needs of the business community.

Skilled and talented labour. The emergence of the 'knowledge economy' as a major driver of growth has meant human capital - people - are the most valuable assets that many businesses hold. Accordingly, we see that businesses have begun to 'follow people' rather than vice versa as used to be the case. By this we mean that companies located in areas that do not appeal to highly educated and skilled (and consequently highly mobile) workers find it increasingly hard to operate competitively.

All of this leads us to the conclusion that once the fundamentals of good business have been secured - land, connections - the focus moves towards educating, attracting and retaining a skilled and diverse workforce.

• **A place people want to live**

There is a broad consensus on the elements that make a city 'liveable'. These include housing that meets local needs, good schools, and cultural and leisure amenities.

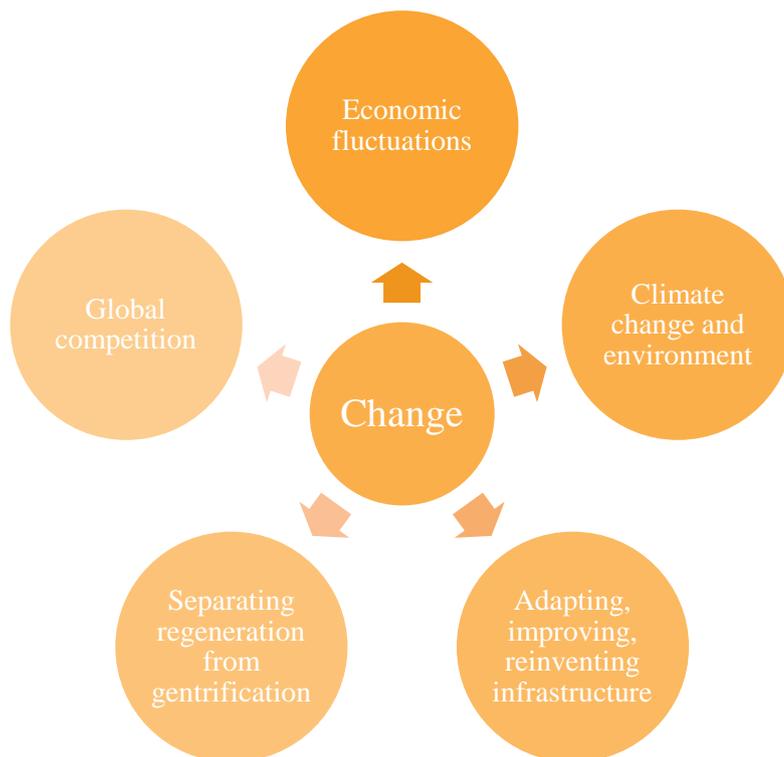
Housing that meets local needs. Cities need a good mix of housing, and that includes a mix appropriate for attracting the types of workers for businesses in the area. Accordingly, cities should have a mix of homes from studio flats to executive homes, for rent or to buy, that meet local needs. This requires local planners and developers to have their ear to the ground to what the market needs.

Good schools. Both privately and publicly provided, are important in educating children growing up in the city but also in attracting young professional families to the area. Research from Centre for Cities has shown that cities with the highest long-term economic performance have the highest levels of achievement for students A-levels including maths and English.

Cultural and leisure office, including retail. There is an increasing body of evidence of the importance of culture in attracting and retaining skilled people - including most recently a comprehensive analysis and strategy from the GLA on the importance of grassroots music to the economy. For example, London sees its cultural offer as a clear benefit it offers over rival financial centres such as Frankfurt.

• **A place of resilience and reinvention**

One factor which really marks a great city is its ability to 'roll with the punches' and change with prevailing economic circumstance. It is often noted that the Northern cities have never really recovered from the gradual decline of the manufacturing sector but, actually, great cities such as London and New York lost many manufacturing jobs. Their ability to reinvent themselves is credited, in part, to the diversity of their economies and the legacy to knowledge-intensive jobs which can adapt more easily.



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• **A place with personality**

The factors we have mentioned above are, in our view, necessary but not sufficient to be a great city. They don't paint the whole picture. There are plenty of places which can boast of the above elements that wouldn't be considered 'great cities' even whilst there are great cities that cannot boast some of the above, but are well loved regardless.

It's hard to define the 'x factor' which elevates a nice place into a great city but, in our view, at least some of it comes down to 'personality'. When one thinks of the great cities of the world - New York, Tokyo, Istanbul, Rio de Janeiro - there is a sense that we know what we expect from them. In part this reflects just our repeated exposure to images and stories of places - there is an element of familiarity even with cities we have never visited. Whether it is the iconic design or buildings or how the city and its people present itself, cities with a distinct 'flavour' tend to stick out as great places above others.

Milton Keynes: today and beyond

Almost 50 years on from its first developments and over 30 years on from its years of most rapid construction, Milton Keynes is reaching a new era. It is experiencing 'big city' problems for the first time, like congestion inequality and ageing property. The new town has the opportunity to start allowing some areas to decay in order to create the conditions for creative reuse and renewal.

We should expect that regeneration will look aesthetically different here than elsewhere. We are perhaps more used to rebuilding Victorian factories on a dockside, whereas in Milton Keynes perhaps it is more likely to be in a disused 80s low rise light industrial unit. But we should be relaxed about that because that would be in keeping with the feeling and spirit of Milton Keynes: Milton Keynes a very different place to other places, and so we should expect its process of growth, regeneration and renewal to look different as well.

It is obvious that great efforts have been made under many of the headings above – in particular attempts to develop the culture and leisure offer, and that these are beginning to bear fruit. Nevertheless more is to be done. It is an open question the extent to which the lack of a typical student population associated with Milton Keynes' two universities is hindering attempts to encourage grassroots culture and a diversity of leisure offer. The educational offer is not yet good enough – particularly the secondary offer.

Obviously there is much to be cheerful about. Milton Keynes has the fastest growing economy outside of London with enviable rates of private sector employment growth and business start-ups. It is the most successful of the UK's new towns and its vision for the future should be predicated on how to build on and cement its success into the future, and ensuring that all residents are able to share in it.