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Physical and functional emptiness, example of Slotervaart, Amsterdam

Doug Saunders

Restructuring the Zwischenstadt

There is an urgent need for planners and architects to turn their attention to one of the most extensive, yet neglected, challenges of the twenty-first century – the problem of creating social mobility in the urban periphery. The most acute problems of social exclusion, economic isolation and failed integration of newcomers today are found no longer in the high-density slums and working-class districts of the inner city, but in the urban periphery – the high-rise and garden-community suburbs, the banlieue and ring-road council estates, the plattenbau and HLM and panelák districts, the so-called “cities without cities”¹ nestled amid motorway interchanges, the disconnected residential archipelagos of the Zwischenstadt. These lower-density, less-connected districts are increasingly the places where immigrant-origin populations settle and where traditionally excluded minority populations are hou-

sed, where concentrated poverty occurs, and where urban populations have both the most precarious economic situations and the greatest scope and ambition for intergenerational mobility. At root, these barriers are often physical. And I believe that these spaces can become more successful through intelligent design and planning interventions.

This is, in its essence, the challenge of empty spaces. The new “arrival cities” on the urban periphery are pocked with expanses of physical and functional emptiness. These are both physical lacunae – grassy or forested spaces between apartment towers that look appealing on architectural renderings but prove threatening and alienating to residents and forbid social and economic connections; long and sometimes dangerous expanses between home and transportation, buffer zones that mask a lack of commerce and activity – and a civic emptiness, created by the political and institutional voids left by an absence of investment in the crucial institutions of inclusion and mobility, in top-quality schools and libraries, in well-promoted commercial streets and cultural districts, in health clinics and community police forces and transportation hubs that turn a marginal and failing district into a hub of attraction and escape. If you ask members of marginal migrant and minority communities what has held them back, and held their children back, in social and economic progress, what you are most likely to hear is a list of absences: missing institutions, missing opportunities and investments, and empty zones and blank territories that prevent any physical or economic connection to the larger city and its economic and political resources.

By changing the design of the place where people live, can we improve the quality of their lives? Can we improve the success of their business, and rescue the education and integration of their children? I have come to believe that we can dramatically change outcomes with targeted interventions that change the architecture and urban planning of a district, and the mix of institutions, features, infrastructure and services within and between districts, in order to remove obstacles to success and improve human-development outcomes. This perspective sometimes is called “spatial determinism” or “environmental determinism,” but the German language provides the more useful compound word, *Baukultur*, a concept that has come to encompass the larger question of the human communities that form around and are shaped by buildings, and the ability of physical design to transform communities and lives.

The arrival city on the edge

My work has focused on those urban districts where people first settle when they arrive in a new city. I call these districts arrival cities. They are the cities within cities created by networks of similar-background migrants. These migrants form self-contained networks within a known geographic terrain (a neighbourhood, a set of streets, a region of a city shared with other newcomer groups) that link new migrants to one another in webs of mutual support. The arrival-city networks provide links back to the immigrants’ place of origin, and, if the arrival city succeeds, forward into the economic, cultural, educational and political life of the established city. These districts are used by migrants to build up pools of social capital, real capital in the form of mutual loans, accumulations of knowledge, and forms of political and cultural organization that link them to one another and to the wider city, its economy and polity.

In other words, these neighbourhoods serve for immigrant communities as primary vehicles of integration. I am arguing that integration – an often nebulous and controversial concept that tends to animate debates in national politics – takes place entirely at the municipal level; it is all about urbanism. Integration is how newcomers use the urban resources around them to make themselves part of the life of the city and the wider national community. The question for cities, then, is how best to enable newcomers to become economically, educationally and culturally integrated. Not to “integrate them”

from above, as national governments tend to think, but to create the conditions where they can integrate themselves. Or in other words, what I think should be the goal for politicians and policymakers and planners: To remove the obstacles to self-integration.

And what I hope to illustrate is that design, planning and policy interventions at the urban level can very often make the difference between success and failure in the integration of immigrants, refugees and economically vulnerable established citizens.



Urban space as vehicles of integration

Motives and Examples of restructuring the Zwischenstadt

To understand how urban spaces serve as vehicles of integration – and to understand how they can contain built-in obstacles to integration – it is important to see how arriving newcomers view, and choose, their urban destinations. When immigrants arrive in a new country, the first thing they seek is a place to live – and since most immigrants (even those who were from middle-class backgrounds in their own countries) start off at lower-than-average incomes and much lower levels of connectedness, they the places they choose to settle usually fall on the bottom rung of the urban ladder.

In seeking a specific place to settle (or to resettle, if their initial settlement was chosen by state authorities), immigrants are almost always looking for three things: First, a place where housing, whatever its form of tenure and ownership, is affordable to newcomers (and therefore is generally less expensive than the city's average). Second, a place where there are known economic and employment opportunities – jobs that match their abilities and are known to be open to them, or small-business opportunities, or at the very least transportation links that lead to such known opportunities. Third, a

place where there are networks of established migrants from the same country, region or culture, who can assist with settlement and integration and provide employment and financial support. The last two elements are always more important than the first – immigrant families will choose to live where the housing is theoretically unaffordable if there are known economic opportunities and established ethno-linguistic networks – but arrival cities are generally more likely to take shape in districts with lower-than-average housing costs, whether the housing is social, cooperative, market-rental or owned.

It is important to understand that settlement of immigrants in arrival-city districts almost never manifests itself as a direct, instant or one-way transfer of intact families from a “sending” to a “receiving” country. Typically, individual members of families first establish themselves in an arrival-city district, often sharing accommodation with earlier arrivals from the same village or region, and relying on earlier immigrants from similar backgrounds for assistance in finding labour, credit and other support. They will use this precarious tenure to send money back to support the “sending” community. Later, if modestly successful, they will gradually bring other family members and shift to more secure forms of accommodation tenure within the arrival-city neighbourhood. In the process, they form networks of mutual support in both the “sending” and “receiving” communities; these networks continually engage in a two-way transfer of funds, people, credit and knowledge. It can be years and sometimes decades before a family has “immigrated” fully.

Once immigrants have settled in these nascent arrival-city districts, they seek the next accessible rungs on the urban ladder. A job, or (more likely today) the sets of work arrangements that development scholars call “portfolios of the poor”² – combinations of employment and trade opportunities that include informal and formal jobs, “gig economy” work, short-term and longer-term contracts and work agreements. A small-business opportunity – perhaps a shop, a restaurant, a place to practice a trade, an import-export venture, a service. A school that offers the next generation, whether foreign-born or locally born, a pathway to further education. A connection to the political system of the larger city. A pathway to eventual full citizenship. A transportation link that will provide access to the city, and to the city’s customers and employers. Arrival-city districts, while rich in resources (especially low-cost housing) that allow them to serve as the bottom rung on the urban ladder, are often lacking these second- and third-rung resources – especially when they are located on the urban periphery.

To understand how arrival-city neighbourhoods can be vulnerable to failure – that is, how they can cause generations of newcomers to be trapped, without access to the instruments of economic and social mobility – it is worth auditing them for barriers and obstacles to success. As part of a longer-term research project into urban-migrant integration obstacles in which I participated with the World Bank and the Bertelsmann Foundation, I have developed a grid examining the four major types of integration barriers that can be subjects of policy intervention. They include:

- **Physical barriers**, including housing and planning and transit. At their core is the need for population density, intensity of activity, and diversity and flexibility of use, and both consumer and employee access to the arrival-city district.
- **Institutional barriers**, including especially schooling, but also social services, community-based policing, health services, settlement support and community resources including libraries, childcare facilities and youth-support centres.
- **Economic barriers**, which include nearby job opportunities at various levels, the right to be hired, the ability to start a legal business in the neighbourhood, places for locally owned shops, restaurants and manufacturing facilities to flourish, and access to formal banking services and legal credit.
- **Citizenship barriers** – the right to participate in the community and its government, to buy housing, to put children into post-secondary educational institutions, to invest in the community, to become a legal citizen, to vote and run for political office.

While I am concentrating in this chapter on physical barriers, many of the other categories of barrier – institutional and economic and citizenship – manifest themselves in the form of physical absences, in a lack of specific buildings and centres, a lack of spaces in which to conduct business, education, politics and civic life, and a lack of transportation and communication resources to connect newcomer communities to these institutions in the established “core” city. In most of these cases, the “barrier” is identifiable as something material that is missing in the physical community, and is therefore subject to urban-planning solutions.

During the twentieth century, the low-cost, inner-city immigration districts in the post-industrial cores of many Western cities were naturally endowed with many of these resources and institutions, at least in rudimentary form. These “ethnic” districts also were located near infrastructure and transportation connections and tended to have the high population densities, intensities of activity and diversity of land usage that facilitate rapid integration. Districts such as East London, the Lower East Side of New York, Belleville in Paris and Kreuzberg in Berlin were thought to be insalubrious, disreputable and violent, but their centrality and density, and history of establishment, blessed them with many of the resources needed for success: Cheap housing that nobody else wanted, high population density, informal or lax land-use zoning. Locations right next to established middle-class neighbourhoods, providing a steady foot and vehicle traffic of customers with money to spend.

But those inner-city districts, in recent decades, have become victims of their own success. They have become successful, attractive to the established middle class, and often prohibitively expensive. While this process, sometimes known as gentrification, is often to the great benefit of immigrant families, who are disproportionate purchasers of housing and retail buildings in these districts and therefore able to capture the property-value increase, it renders these neighbourhoods inaccessible to new generations of low-income immigrants. As a consequence, the centre gravity for newcomers, increasingly, has shifted to the urban periphery.

The modern, peripheral arrival city hampered by three macroeconomic effects that tend to create more obstacles to integration than existed in previous decades. The first, mentioned above, is the suburbanization of immigration. The second is the inflation of the property markets of most Western cities, making property ownership – the traditional vehicle of economic integration for many immigrant groups – more inaccessible. And the third is the informalization of labour markets, meaning that the full-time, long-term manufacturing job – the old linchpin of immigration success – is far less prevalent; instead, immigrants will more typically pursue a range of short-term and long-term work opportunities, formal and informal labour, small-business and buy-and-sell opportunities, ‘gig economy’ and piecework, the “portfolios of the poor.” These portfolios may lead to annual incomes comparable to those of the old full-time manufacturing jobs, but in a more haphazard, precarious, risk-filled environment.

These three trends – the suburbanization of immigration and poverty; the unaffordability of urban housing; the fragmentation of the labour market – all converge on the inner peripheries of major cities and create spaces where it is often more difficult to make a start, to achieve intergenerational social mobility, or to escape poverty and isolation.

This is where interventions can best take place – interventions in policy, planning and built form. A targeted policy to remove a pre-existing obstacle to integration, to fill an empty space or to add a missing feature, can prevent crises from emerging. A one-time action to alleviate a known integration obstacle, even if the up-front cost is high, can save enormous costs, in social services or welfare dependency or policing or remediation, in later decades.

Removing obstacles through design: Three approaches

How do you identify barriers to integration in a periphery district? One principle is worth remembering: The very characteristic that has made an urban district an ideal place to become an arrival city – that is, the characteristic that has caused its housing costs to be lower than the city’s average – is the same characteristic that may later cause it to falter and become trapped. Sometimes such districts have lower housing costs because they are located far from the established urban economy, with poor transportation links, so they are isolated. Sometimes they are disreputable or dangerous – or, because of dark expanses between housing units, simply feel dangerous, especially for women living there. Sometimes they lack crucial institutions, or good schools. Sometimes they have such a low population density that internal markets and networks cannot take shape.

One practice is worth remembering: Ask the residents. Speak to the immigrants and members of marginalized populations in these communities what trajectory they began upon, where they imagined their neighbourhood leading them, what their aspirations, upon arrival, had been for their future and their children’s future. And ask them what factors now stand in the way of those aspirations. The obstacles they identify will often be specific and concrete – problems that can be solved through planning and design interventions.

Let us look at some examples of those interventions that can most directly be contemplated by urban planners, architects and the policymakers who are able to transform the built form and physical infrastructure of urban spaces. I will focus here on three categories of intervention.

Interventions that alter the built form and physical layout for better density, intensity, functional mixture and social mix.

In terms of interventions that transform the built form to change the social outcomes of a residential district, few have been as ambitious as the decade’s worth of urban-renewal projects, affecting some 200,000 current and potential residents, in the northwestern Amsterdam districts of Slotervaart and Overtoomse Veld. These inner-suburban districts of postwar apartment and garden-city housing have served, since the 1960s, as arrival-city platforms for citizens of Moroccan and Turkish origin. After a young resident of Moroccan descent born in these neighbourhoods precipitated a national crisis by committing an infamous 2004 terrorist murder, authorities (including the Amsterdam mayor) came to recognize that the physical form and layout of the neighbourhood was one of the contributing factors to widespread social isolation and intergenerational decline that had come to characterize northwest Amsterdam.

A variety of large-scale projects by the housing cooperatives that control most of the residential space have sought to increase population density sharply, turn isolating empty spaces into hubs of social and commercial activity, add places of business, commerce and industry into residential areas and remove barriers isolating these districts from established commercial centres (as well as important interventions to improve schools and other institutions).

In some cases, the garden-city apartments, with their alienating grass-and-forest expanses between low-rise apartments, have been demolished, and replaced with tight-spaced 8- to 10-storey apartment buildings on grid streets with the ground-level floors containing sidewalk-accessible shops and restaurants to foster immigrant business – an explicit physical imitation of the built form of famous urban immigration districts that have succeeded. In other cases, the low-rise apartments have been kept intact, but the voids between them filled with new structures – housing or libraries or “urban blocks” of institutions – to attract rather than deter activity. And in others, lifeless cement pedestrian squares have been given density by making them busy hubs of mixed-level commerce, food service and education.



Consolidation and enrichment of use, Slotervaart, Amsterdam (Paul de Ruiter Architects)

A key component in this large-scale project was the addition of many units of middle-class housing. The population density was often quadrupled, and typically around two-thirds of the new units were comparatively expensive apartments for purchase – their cost intended both to underwrite some of the cost of redevelopment and to create a greater social and income mix of residents. While this pricing scheme has attracted many “white” middle-class residents, typically young couples, from central Amsterdam, a great many of these more expensive apartments have been purchased by immigrant-origin families who have had some employment or entrepreneurial success and are choosing to enter the middle class within their own neighbourhood rather than moving out – a significant change which is benefiting the district’s social stability and school quality. In other words, the spatial intervention has created a new immigrant middle class within the district.

Few cities are possessing the resources to make such large-scale physical changes. But there are policy tools that can entice housing-market players to remove barriers to inclusion and integration. In Toronto, a characteristic form of immigrant housing during the twenty-first century has been the “slab farm” districts of privately-owned postwar rental highrise apartment buildings, with 20- to 25-storey structures separated by grassy empty spaces – more than 2000 such buildings fill many of the inner and outer suburbs; designed for automobile commuting to industrial jobs, they provide a very low population density and strictly residential zoning that prevent urban cohesion and inclusion. In 2014, Toronto’s city council passed a unique policy known as “tower renewal,” which gave permission to the owners of these buildings, without the need for zoning approval or review, to build new structures in the empty spaces between buildings, creating hubs of shops, restaurants, services and (eventually) low-rise housing and, ideally, sufficient density to make the case for mass-transit connections. This policy initiative is designed to make density-boosting and mixed-use intensification of older residential districts financially appealing to developers.



Subsequent qualification of the public space, Mexico-City (Rozana Montiel, Alin W. Wallach)

On a much smaller and more precise scale, it is worth examining the public-housing interventions designed by Mexico City architect Rozana Montiel. Many of the city's vast low-rise public-housing projects are marked by forbidding courtyards between buildings that tend to become scenes of petty crime and gang activity, leaving residents, especially women and children, confined and isolated while discouraging more productive enterprise (and lowering the value of the housing, which is typically owned by the residents). Ms. Montiel's practice, working with the residents of the apartments, designs and builds mixed-use spaces to fill these squares with places for child care, open-air libraries, shops and services, cinema and entertainment, and classes – often simultaneously. The result is spaces that rather than repelling outsiders and keeping people confined, creates places of attraction that draw people from both outside and inside apartments and encourage them to do business, play, learn and take care of one another's properties and public spaces. Residents of the affected apartments told me the interventions have raised their property values and improved their business prospects – and made the apartment complexes into fully-functioning neighbourhoods.

Interventions that augment or improve transportation infrastructure for better mutual access to the established city and for the creation of points of attraction

Simply adding a more frequent bus route or a subway station or light rapid transit network can greatly improve the outcomes of a peripheral arrival-city neighbourhood, both by giving its residents easier access to employment in the established city (thus reducing commute times during which children are unattended) and by giving residents of the city access to the attractions and businesses of the peripheral neighbourhood. But the most successful and transformative transportation interventions are those that make the neighbourhood's transportation hub an attraction and focal point unto itself.

An outstanding example of such an intervention is the one constructed between 1999 and 2007 in Nou Barris, a sprawling set of mainly highrise-apartment districts, housing tens of thousands of mainly immigrant-descended residents, on the eastern periphery of Barcelona. Until the end of the twentieth century, the apartment residences in this region were physically and socially isolated both from one another (with frightening blank spaces and ravines preventing engagement and interconnection) and from the larger city (with great distances ill served by public transit). A set of large-scale interventions created rapid-transit connections (in the form of major Metro stations and a set of high-speed bus lines on dedicated ring-road lanes), and a set of major public parks, including Park Nou Barris, the city's second-largest green space – but, most significantly, it tied the transportation and the parks together to turn the formerly forbidding “in-between” spaces into major attractions that draw together the disparate residents of the district at the same time as making its immigrant-run businesses, cultural festivities and urban fabric an attraction for residents of greater Barcelona. The result has been something of a renaissance for this quarter, changing it from a neighbourhood immigrants sought to leave into an area that now attracts young Barcelonans to settle and join the community.

Similar transportation-centered interventions have had transformative effects in, for example, the southern Amsterdam district of Bijlmermeer (a deprived highrise public-housing immigrant district that has become far more successful by becoming a transportation hub), or the Lower Lea Valley and Stratford-upon-Thames regions of East London, which were transformed from marginality to centrality by a major new transportation link created for the 2012 London Olympics, and associated housing, shopping and small-business facilities.

Interventions that create spaces and institutions whose use and function
can be determined by the community

Many barriers to inclusion – especially in the urban periphery – are created by the inability of marginal communities to have their own control over the use and shape of their environment, and over the institutions that populate that environment. Some of the most successful interventions are those that simply provide residents their own controllable space, institutions and the materials and powers necessary to shape their own collective destiny.

On the most rudimentary level, it is worth studying the architectural and planning ideas of acclaimed architect Alejandro Aravena, who, in the Quinta Monroy housing project in northern Chile, built hundreds of rudimentary block-frame houses, without cladding but connected to modern power, water and data infrastructure, in tight-knit formations that allowed multiple uses. The rural-to-urban migrants who populated the district were expected to bring their own materials and ‘finish’ and put additions on the housing, and decide how common spaces could be used. The result, after a couple years, was the sort of characterful and thriving community that is more commonly seen in the older historic districts of the inner city, with a strong sense of community.

This sort of semi-unplanned, resident-controlled development is not impossible to replicate in more developed countries. A good example can be seen in the Südstadt district of the southern German city of Tübingen – an immigrant-heavy peripheral district in a former quarter of military barracks. There, under the direction of the urban planner Andreas Feldtkeller, the quarter was turned into a dense midrise neighbourhood whose buildings and public spaces are often of undetermined purpose, able to be used as housing, shops, restaurants and small factories. This has allowed typical immigrant entrepreneurship to flourish, a healthy mix of residents from different backgrounds and economic levels to mix, and the district to become an attraction for residents of the wider city – all under the control of residents.

In many cases, these resident-controlled developments in physical space are best accompanied by the creation of institutions – schools, business councils and most significantly police forces – that are at least partially under the control of the migrant-descended and culturally marginalized communities that dominate these regions. The ability to control both the uses and future development of physical space, as well as the shape and purpose of local branches of key civic institutions (whose buildings and facilities, in their design and location, are central to their success) can be crucial in transforming a failing and dependent community into a thriving new member of the larger city's cultural, economic and political fabric.

Seeing neighbourhoods as trajectories

Mayors and other municipal officials often despair over the fate of socially marginalized peripheral districts that appear to be spiralling into intergenerational poverty and social disconnection. These districts, from an Olympian vantage, appear to be cancerous tumors on the side of the city. Yet it is important for municipal officials and planners instead to look at the chaos and unpredictability of such districts as an asset rather than a liability. With a smart intervention, they can be connected, linked to the city's fabric, and promoted as destinations. Is there a poor immigrant shopping and eating street, with no signs in the country's official language? Advertise it. Create easy access routes into it. Put up signs. When a peripheral district lacks focus and cohesiveness, when it is becoming a socio-economic trap, often the solution is to turn it into a target, to make people come to it as a place.

If cities spend money warning people to stay away from a district rather than welcoming them into it, then your actions will become self-fulfilling prophecies: Residents will not have a chance to mesh with the established city, and will become the problem they have sought to avoid. Those residents are aware of the obstacles to their own inclusion and self-integration; it is a question of listening to them, and removing those obstacles.

The key to seeing the obstacles is to stop looking at cities as collections of boxes full of people, as points on a statistical table. Instead, we need to look at cities as collections of life trajectories. Migrants see their lives not as fixed points but as a set of dotted lines. Those lines lead from a faraway village, city or place of conflict to established economic, educational, consumer and political life of the city; in the imagination of the newcomer (or of the marginalized resident), there is another line that leads to full inclusion.

If we are able to trace those dotted lines, talk to the migrants and find out where they lead, and remove the obstacles in advance, then we can turn migration from a misfortune and a threat into a great opportunity to build new, prosperous communities that will shape and improve the future life of our cities.

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Notes

- 1 Thomas Sieverts, *Cities Without Cities: An Interpretation of the Zwischenstadt*, London 2003. In German: *Zwischenstadt*, Braunschweig 1997. (TN)
- 2 Stuart Rutherford/Jonathan Morduch/Daryl Collins: *Portfolios of the Poor. How the World's Poor Live on \$2 a Day*, Princeton 2009. (TN)

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Doug Saunders is a British and Canadian journalist and author. With *Arrival City* (2011) and *The Myth of the Muslim Tide* (2012) he became part of the international discourse about migration. His latest book *Maximum Canada*, Penguin Random House, New York (2017).