Geo Factsheet

Number 19

Residential Land Use

Where people live and the reasons for these patterns are some of the most fundamental questions facing the urban geographer. Social categories such as class and ethnicity are given a spatial dimension in the city. Looking at case studies from across the world, this Factsheet will examine the most important forces determining residential land use.

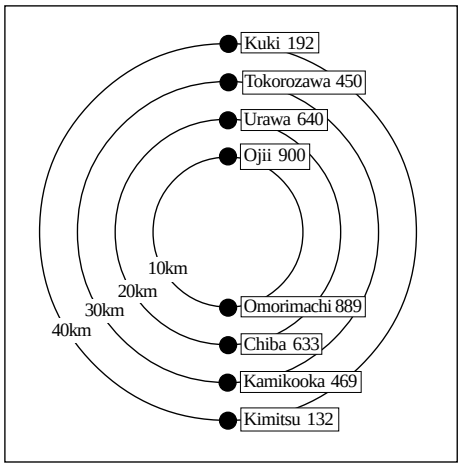
The pre-industrial city

It has always been possible to see in cities the gulf between the rich and the poor that characterise a society as a whole. Residential location is a matter of spatial segregation based on prestige. Powerful people locate their homes in the most desirable places and the poor must build around them. In pre-industrial times, this meant that the elite lived in the centre, both to be close to the headquarters of government and religious and cultural power, and to avoid the slow, uncomfortable travel that living further out would involve.

The impact of the Industrial Revolution

With the development of the railways the range of possible residential locations expanded massively. The Industrial Revolution also meant that merchants and the middle class more generally replaced the nobility as the dominant social class. A group whose power was based on money replaced one whose power was based on cultural and religious authority. The new middle class had less need to control the city centre with its symbolically important churches and palaces and so the development of the railways coincided with the rise of a class more inclined to exploit the suburban opportunities the railways offered.

Fig 1. Declining value of residential land in the Tokyo area by distance from the city centre 1991 (units)



The classic Burgess model

The residential pattern produced by these changes in industry and transport appears paradoxical: the richest people lived on cheaper, outer land. This pattern was explained by Burgess by drawing upon an analogy from the world of biology and ecology. Ecological processes of invasion, competition and succession were applied to groups of people. For Burgess, the city can only grow outwards with new housing built on the periphery. These new homes are more desirable and expensive and so are occupied by the richest and most mobile groups. Each 'lower class' group also need to expand and attempt to occupy better quality housing stock. Each group is simultaneously invading areas occupied by the next higher social group and being invaded by the next lower group. The result is an outward expansion as each group climbs the social ladder and succeeds to a 'rung' (residential location) previously occupied by a higher social class.

Limitations to the classic model

The Burgess pattern of residential land use in which social class increases with distance from the city centre suffers from the problems of any such model: it simplifies and generalises. Most importantly, the concept of 'social class' comes to mean little more than type of occupation, ranging from manual ('lower class') to professional ('higher class') positions. In reality there are many other factors affecting where people live, including the following:

1. *Economic factors* - education, occupation, rent paid
2. *Social factors* - fertility, female labour participation
3. *Ethnic factors* - strength of group ties, extent of discrimination and segregation

Burgess himself was well aware that reality was far more complex than his model. His own work in Chicago highlighted the significance of ethnic clustering with Italians, Chinese and black areas. It is perhaps best therefore to recognize the wide range of factors affecting residential land use and to see which are most important in particular cities.

Case Study 1
Tokyo

As a result of the Japanese post-war economic boom, Tokyo has seen massive changes in its urban structure. So many offices have been built and land prices in the city centre are consequently so high, that in residential terms the city resembles a doughnut: no-one can afford to live in the centre. A few neighbourhoods have survived between the commercial core and the residential ring, but these elite residential areas, able to outbid office functions, do not form a continuous zone.

The result for the majority is an arduous daily journey to their places of work in the CBD. With 2.3 million daily commuters this represents probably the largest flow of people in the world. One consequence of high land and house prices (see Fig.1) is that young adults cannot afford to leave their parents' homes: multi-generation living is forced upon Tokyo families by high land costs. There are however several different kinds of suburb. Industry located near railways spawns workers housing in planned clusters of drab, multi-storey apartments known as danchi. Other types of suburb develop around universities whilst outer train stations provide the focus for secondary CBDs with their own commercial centres.

Case Study 2
South Africa and Zimbabwe

It has already been seen from the example of Chicago how groups of people from the same racial or national background tend to live close together. Such clustering may begin as newcomers to the city who look to relatives and others of the same ethnic group for both physical shelter and psychological support in the strange setting they find themselves in. These clusters persist because people may continue to find support in living near others from the same background and because they may face discrimination and opposition in trying to move to other parts of the city. In countries like South Africa (before 1994) and Zimbabwe (before 1980), residential segregation was legally enforced. Black people could only reside in the city at all if they were employed there. This usually meant that only single men working in factories would be allowed to reside in the city. These men would be accommodated in rudimentary hostels

for long periods before they could afford to return to their families in distant parts of the country. Over time, the white governments could not prevent black urbanisation but were determined to keep growing black townships separate from lower density white areas. Many South African townships became globally known as centres of political activity and violence: Crossroads in Cape Town, Alexandria and Soweto - literally SOuth WEst TOwnship - in Johannesburg.

With Independence in Zimbabwe the pattern of residential land use changed considerably as blacks moved out of the overcrowded areas to which they had been confined. White areas closest to sources of employment and adjacent to areas already occupied by blacks were penetrated first. However, the most exclusive areas of very rich whites remain beyond the scope of black invasion, but now for reasons rather than race. A similar transition can be expected in South Africa.

Case Study 3
Mexico City

Similar to the Chicago mapped by Burgess, residential land use in Mexico City shows how local factors complicate a basically concentric pattern (Fig.2). Physical geography has been very significant in shaping where people live. The wealthy prefer to live in the south and west where there is more woodland and less pollution from industry based in the north-east and north-west. Most of the east of the city is built on old lake beds and can support only poor grade housing.

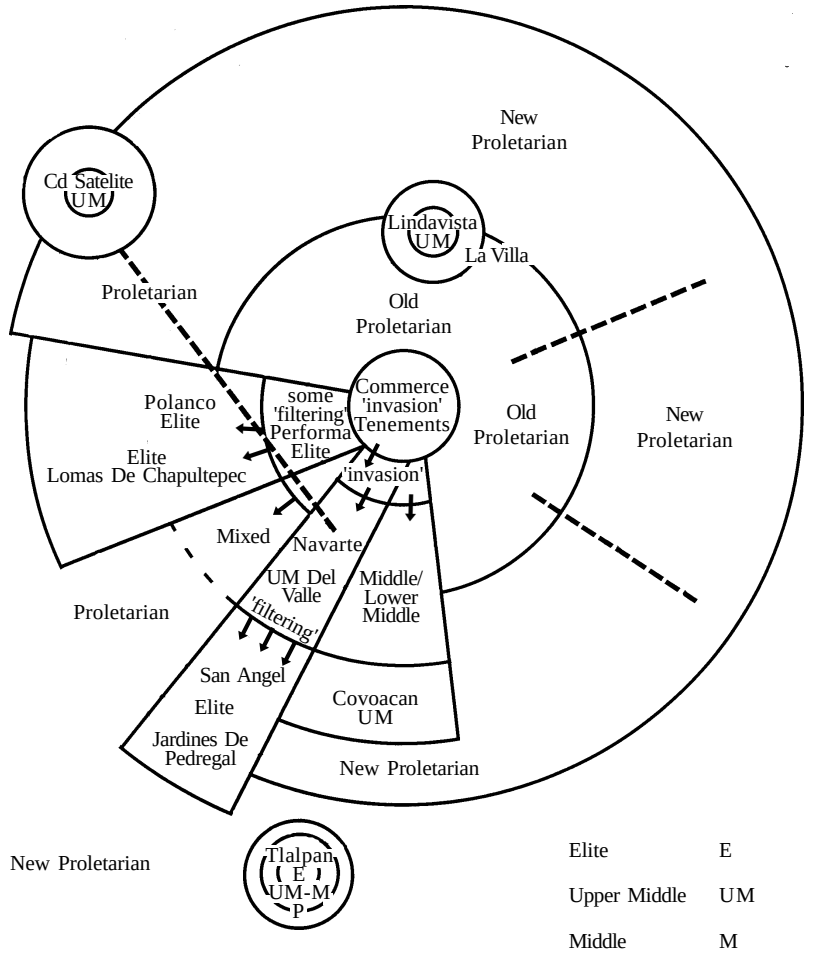
Gentrification

Many cities in both the developed and developing worlds have experienced the process of gentrification: the invasion of middle class or higher income groups of previously working class neighbourhoods with the resulting displacement of many of the original inhabitants. Formerly run-down areas are renovated, the price of land and of residential units soars with more people likely to be owning rather than renting their homes in gentrified areas. Two alternative explanations are usually put forward:

1. The demand-led theory: this puts the emphasis on a middle-class reaction against suburban life and the tensions of commuting. Young people, many single, prefer the Bohemian lifestyle of being close to the entertainments of the city centre and of living in a more 'atmospheric' setting than that offered by more uniformly residential suburban areas. It is this cultural change, the demand of some middle class groups for an alternative to suburban life, that is said to cause gentrification.

2. The supply-led theory: this set of ideas prefers a more economic than cultural explanation. Property investors see an opportunity in doing up lower class inner city areas and so provide a supply of renovated, unconventional housing stock. Gentrification is said to be the result of property investors exploiting a gap in the market to make money.

Fig 2. Diagrammatic representation of 'ecological' areas of Mexico City



For many people in Mexico City - and in Latin America as a whole - there simply are not enough houses to go around. The poor have no option but to build their own homes. Some governments have felt that these shanty towns are demeaning to their country's reputation and so thousands of homes have been bulldozed. In many cases, however, governments have accepted that such 'self-help housing' is the only way people will get any shelter.

***Exam Hint** - The main shortcoming remains the lack of detail about the pattern of land use in **real** places. Discussion of stereotyped concentric circles dominate too many scripts.*

To return to the case of Mexico City, contours and natural divides guide the wealthy into wedge shaped sectors set apart from the poorer residents. There is also evidence of 'gentrification', the process whereby elite groups have moved to areas formerly known as poor areas. Significantly though, in moving into Tlalpan and San Angel, the Mexico City elite have not gone too far beyond their traditional quarter in the south and west.

Conclusion

Patterns of residential land use are more complicated than Burgess' ideas of the expansion and invasion of social groups into more desirable housing further out. An understanding of residential land use will be based on a consideration of many factors - physical geography, land prices, policies of racial segregation - and then a decision must be made as to whichare of most relevance in each particular city.

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