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Viewpoint

What makes a great city great? An American perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article takes up the question of what makes a great city great? It begins by using historical examples to extrapolate and define city greatness. The concept is synthesized in a simple formulation of the “4Cs”; with each “C” respectively standing for currency, cosmopolitanism, concentration and charisma. Currency conveys the unique attributes of a city’s fundamental values and its ability to form, lead or dictate the temper of the times. Cosmopolitanism entails an ability to embrace international, multicultural or polyethnic features. Concentration is defined by demographic density and productive mass. Charisma is based on a magical appeal that generates mass enthusiasm, admiration or reverence. Four American cities (New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco) are examined through a sequence of thumbnail sketches. These sketches are complemented by data that measure the standing of each city relative to each of the 4Cs. The article concludes with a discussion of how a city (Chicago) can find a niche for asserting greatness, whether a “post modern city” (Los Angeles) can be a model for future greatness and the limitations of reaching for greatness.

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Any effort to explain the meaning of a great city is bound to elicit a multiplicity of responses. Journalists often equate a great city with a “hot city” (an influx of people and capital) or with a “cool city” (the presence of jazz clubs, art festivals, etc). More serious accounts tie the “great city” to desirable outcomes, like the ability to effectively govern or bring about sustainable development (Ng and Hills, 2003). Scholars of the subject sometimes infer that a great city is also a “global city” (Friedmann, 1986; Sassen, 1991; Boschen, 2008). The concept of a great city has been treated as a further step a “world city” can take toward greatness (Ng and Hills, 2003). As I discuss later the idea of a “global city” is not entirely the same as a “great city”. The two ideas are often conflated and sometimes add to the conceptual confusion. Despite the available literature on the “great city” the concept suffers from ambiguity and loose meaning (Dunn, 1991; Leapman, 1989; Robson and Regan, 1972; Tung, 2001).

The ambiguity in scholarship is matched by the fuzziness of policy makers. Mayors from all kinds of cities aspire to the nomenclature of “greatness” with real effects on policies. Minneapolis mayor Ryback (2006) opted for better city design as a way of proving his city’s “greatness”. By contrast, Seoul’s mayor Oh Se-hoon (2009) concentrated on re-making his city’s civil service to demonstrate his city’s “greatness”. At still another end of the world, Paris’ Mayor Bertrand Delanoë emphasized his city’s quality of life as a specific expression of “greatness” (Lefevre, 2009). Applying an altogether different logic, policy makers in Houston pursue economic growth

to specifically justify its “greatness” (Economist, 2009). Granted the widespread use of political hyperbole, the idea continues to be a powerful motivator for the kinds of policies pursued by civic elites (OECD, 2006). Given this state of affairs, claims about city greatness deserve our attention. Greatness can be an alluring idea, enabling us to think differently and more broadly about cities. A “great city” approach contrasts with the more frequent attention given to “global cities”, where some of the most salient studies rank cities by a single economic criterion of either business “connectivities” or “producer services” (Taylor and Lang, 2005; Sassen, 1991).

The purpose of this essay is to better explain the notion of a great city as well as move beyond a singular economic orientation for evaluating cities. An examination of this kind cannot and should not be exhaustive, but rather lay out essential attributes for developing the concept. Accordingly, I treat city greatness as a series of necessary attributes. In another manner, I expect to raise questions about *what* makes a city great, *how* various attributes contribute toward that end and *whether* cities should aspire to that accolade.

When we speak of greatness, we mean that a city holds a certain majesty and prominence. Achieving that status means that a city is extraordinary and distinguished in a number of very important ways. This distinction can be encapsulated in attributes that can be projected across the world. The characteristics can vary from military capacity, to cultural assets, to commercial prowess, to the transcendent propositions of philosophy and religion. Periods of greatness may vary and so too will the attributes that brought a particular city into ascendancy (Hall, 1998). At first glance, it may seem that greatness is a matter of random luck, but in reality we can discern consistent patterns that account for a city’s distinct quality.

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To explore this concept, I begin with an historical sketch of cities around the world that have been regarded as great. I rely on historical example, the scholarly literature and illustrations from current practices to distill four basic attributes of city greatness. I then apply them to four cities in the American context.

These attributes are designed to emphasize qualities that are not time specific, but are broadly encompassing and relevant to other historical periods. The idea here is to produce generic attributes of city greatness that might be seen in broader perspective. I then offer thumbnail accounts of four cities to illustrate how they manifest particular attributes and follow up with quantifiable indicators. The selection of our four cities is based on a consensus in the international and national literature that acclaims them as America's leading cities (for the selection of cities see the section on "The 4Cs in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco" and accompanying footnote).

As a mode of inquiry the approach allows me to offer a viewpoint on city greatness within a specific national context that could fit cities elsewhere. It also suggests that the "great city" concept can stand on its own, it can be historically situated, and it can be evaluated in terms of specific attributes. Finally, the approach rests on findings that cities are more than conflict arenas and do pursue long term strategic objectives regarding development (DiGaetano and Klemanski, 1999; Savitch and Kantor, 2002). Many cities will follow development patterns that lead toward or enhance their particular notions of becoming great.

The 4Cs of greatness

One way to envision urban greatness is to comprise it in a simple formulation of the "4Cs", with each "C" respectively standing for *currency*, *cosmopolitanism*, *concentration* and *charisma*. It is the cumulative impact of the "4Cs" that differentiates a great city from other cities.

As applied here, the idea of *currency* has a double meaning. On the one hand, currency connotes the value of something and its ability to carry weight in crucial circumstances. On the other hand, currency indicates a city is up to the temper (zeitgeist) of the times. Currency conveys that a city shapes the world by the value and forwardness of its actions. In discussing this attribute, we might ask, what drives put a city at the cutting edge of world change? More precisely, does a city embody the power of an idea, the more aggressive drives of military conquest, or the material forces of production?

Different historical periods afford us different perspectives on the importance of being current with dominant drives of the time. Many of those cities that achieved greatness were the very apotheosis of a particular attribute which led the way. Athens achieved hegemony in the 5th century BC because it had a powerful fleet, routes for delivering grain and extensive colonies. Through this power, Athens was able to project its achievements in philosophy, drama and architecture to much of the world (Mumford, 1961; Reader, 2004). From the 3rd century onward, Rome's military strength created an empire, which projected itself in public works, road building and architecture (Hall, 1998). During the 14th to 16th centuries Florence captivated people through its painting, sculpture, crafts and even the technology of the era (Hall, 1998). By the 17th century, Amsterdam commanded world attention through its ports and capacity to conduct world trade. Once manufacture drifted into Asia and free trade emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, there was no stopping Hong Kong.

While these historic examples provide some justification for the attribute of currency, it is also rooted in contemporary literature. The much discussed "creative city" is an example of currency. Florida's (2005) "creative classes" are the actual producers of new values that are re-shaping the world, thereby putting their cities at the cutting

edge of change. Similarly, the capacity to cultivate and transmit knowledge also puts some cities at the top of an influential hierarchy of places (Friedmann, 1986; Sassen, 1991). Here we see the attribute of currency manifested in how cities assert themselves.

Cosmopolitanism entails an ability to embrace international, multicultural or polyethnic features. In examining how cosmopolitanism shapes a city we recognize it is not the stock of international elements held within a city, but its flow in and around it. This flow enables people and ideas to circulate throughout urban society. More often than not, the interaction across cultures encourages tolerance, pluralism and an ability to absorb different ways of life.

Here again great cities embodied cosmopolitanism at different times and have done it in different ways. Between the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, Alexandria was the focal point for knowledge seekers from areas around the Mediterranean and throughout North Africa. Thirteenth century Venice achieved renown as a gateway to the Middle East and the Orient. During the late 19th and 20th centuries, immigrants from around the world poured into London's East End and its South Bank.

Cosmopolitanism is also a broadly used attribute whose examples can be seen in contemporary literature. For one, immigration has always been a source of urban rejuvenation and dynamism (Handlin, 1951). Next, the increasingly popular idea of global connectivity as an indicator of a city's importance is rooted within the larger attribute of cosmopolitanism (Taylor and Lang, 2005). After everything else, it is difficult to imagine an important city not having some kind of international outreach, whether in its media (Hamburg) or the attention given to the presence of international organizations (Nairobi).

Concentration is a long-standing feature of cities. As used here, concentration embraces the dual ideas of demographic density and productive mass. While it is possible to have productive mass without demographic density (Silicon Valley) or demographic density without productive mass (Dhaka), these traits can be complementary. Taken together, we might theorize that both high densities and productive mass would lead to the most vibrant cities—first because this kind of city pulsates with human activity all the time (unlike Silicon Valley) and second because it provides material well being for most inhabitants (unlike Dhaka). Concentrated cities are characterized by intense, continuously developed, mixed land uses. Generally speaking, they are amenable to mass transit (particularly rail systems). For these and other reasons, concentrated cities are thought to hold enormous advantages that allow them to be "great". The idea of advantages stemming from concentrated cities goes back to Marshall's (1920) economic theories about the proximity of specialized industries, Jacob's (1961) observations about mixed land use and Porter's (1995) work on economic clusters. These writers saw virtue in the ability of industry and people to concentrate their activities within a bounded, defined location.

Up until recently, concentrated activities were synonymous with the very essence of being a city. The ancient city of Beijing and Medieval European cities like Bruges tell us that all great cities were bounded by walls that tightly defined them (Weber, 1958). Whether or not the compact city is still a valid attribute of greatness or whether it has been replaced by post modern, scattered development remains to be seen.

Unlike our other attributes, the idea of a city being concentrated is more debatable. Traditional writers like Mumford (1961) believed that all great cities were concentrated cities with strong centers. More recently, post modern writers and market oriented planners see great cities of the future being replaced by sprawled or low density localities (Dear, 2002; Gordon and Richardson, 1997). The controversy over whether great cities can also be sprawled cities makes this attribute all the more important. Accordingly, we put these claims to a modest test by examining development patterns in Los Angeles.

Charisma is an elusive concept because so much of it is based on perception and is commonly evaluated by examining mass attitudes. Charisma can be defined as a magical appeal that generates enthusiasm, admiration or reverence. That appeal is based on the evocation of a feeling toward a person or an entity. By this definition “charismatic properties” can be conveyed by icons and spatial forms (Eisenstadt, 1968). The image of a city can be an important component of charisma, epitomized in a commanding symbol of one sort or another. Lynch (1960) demonstrates how symbols can contribute to the “legibility” of a city, enhance its remembrance and thereby advance a deep seated appeal. We can see why Jerusalem’s Western Wall, Paris’ Eifel Tower and Istanbul’s Byzantine era churches/mosques contribute to the charismatic properties of those cities. To be effective, charisma must be authentic and genuinely reside in the history of a city. Beyond the mere sign of a city’s logos is a substantive history which is replete with meaning.

Because they are filled with substantive history, symbols are able to draw the loyalty of mass followers. Much blood has been shed over Jerusalem’s symbols. Even today, Greeks remind visitors that their ancient city is in foreign hands and replace the Turkish name Istanbul with its Byzantine nomenclature of Constantinople. Not all city symbols connote conflict, and we could add to the list Athens’ Parthenon and San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge. Iconic symbols hold meaning for people and govern their perceptions, attitudes and feeling about a city.

Again, the very broadness of this attribute enables us to see it in multiple forms in the contemporary world. Scholars and applied researchers have relied on “image” as a major way of evaluating a city’s importance (Short, 2004; Anholt-GFK Roper, 2009a; MasterCard, 2008). Mayors and policy makers privately claim image is as important as reality. Not surprisingly more and more cities now engage in place marketing and spend large sums of money to “re-brand” so as to acquire a great city image. A city’s charisma embraces this notion of image as well as related perceptions about appeal and status.

The 4Cs in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco

Several caveats govern our understanding about the possibilities for American cities. For one, cities belong to nations and, despite globalization, cities are still part of a nation–state apparatus. Second, most cities are limited by the power of their home countries. Great cities usually become great because the nations in which they are located rise to the fore. Third, in discussing American cities we should acknowledge that greatness is relative to what can be achieved within a national context. Accordingly, the definition of greatness is both relatively and liberally applied—relative because our cities are often compared to other American cities and liberal because it allows for a larger number of cities than is sometimes done.

Within the United States four cities stand out as worthy of being considered “great”. The selection of cities was determined by consulting surveys and data from three sources that ranked cities by various definitions of importance (Foreign Policy, 2008; Anholt-GFK Roper, 2009b; and MasterCard, 2008).¹ New York is an obvious leader and it is followed, in no particular order, by Chicago, Los

Angeles and San Francisco.² We begin with qualitative, thumbnail accounts of how the 4Cs currently work in these cities.

Currency

When we speak of currency, the financial drive of New York is almost unparalleled. Of all the cities around the world, only London rivals (or exceeds) New York. Fueled by two large central business districts in Lower and Mid Manhattan, the city stands at the top of the globally connected localities (Taylor and Lang, 2005). New York’s economic influence extends to the rest of the world for good and bad. Its banks led the way in disseminating capital, enabling parts of Asia to prosper; those same financial houses invented “collateralized debt mortgages” that brought economic misery. The force of New York’s boom periods (2004–2007) and its cycles of bust periods (2008–2009) have reverberated around the world.

Los Angeles demonstrates a different kind of currency. In an age where media shapes mass perception, Los Angeles has led the way in its ability to house image makers. Los Angeles’ incubation of the film industry began in the 1920s and by mid century it held a near monopoly. From that base, the city grew into a television and entertainment capital and a host of other industries followed (aerospace, banking, fashion). Today Los Angeles is one of the highest interconnected cities around the globe and is the second highest technology center in the country (Milken Institute, 1999).

San Francisco is a city of balance and economic diversification. Its financial district is known as the “Wall Street” of the West and it is the home of leading banks like Wells Fargo, Barclays Global Investors and VISA. San Francisco is also tied to the high tech industries in nearby Silicon Valley; it is a leading tourist attraction and it has significant linkages to the rest of the world (GaWC, 2000). The city’s currency is fed by well established industries in health, bio technology and a bevy of first class universities within commuting distance to the city. These assets put the city at the leading edge of innovation.

Chicago is a city that lifted itself into currency during the last two decades. Chicago made its mark as a major distribution, mercantile and manufacturing center but much of its economic base radically changed. Through two decades between 1970 and 1990, Chicago lost more than 40% of its industrial jobs and 17% of its population (Savitch and Kantor, 2002). But the city persevered, and through a combination of skill and foresight a new Chicago emerged. With a rebuilt and expanded downtown, Chicago attracted white collar employment, major corporate headquarters and a burgeoning tourist industry. Thanks to its airport, Chicago now ranks as an international city and its institutions put the city at the top of the technology ladder (GaWC, 2000; Milken, 1999). As we elaborate later, Chicago’s success is not due to its ascension to first place, but to having filled a set of niches that now set it apart from other cities.

Cosmopolitanism

New York is known as the world’s immigrant city and for good reason. From its founding in the 17th century it has been settled by

¹ Rankings were internationally compiled and American cities were then culled from them. The four cities receiving the highest number of overlaps for the highest ranks were selected. *Foreign Policy* collected and analyzed data from 60 cities. The categories included business, education and politics as well as cultural and environmental issues. The Anholt-GFK Roper report was based on a survey of more than 20,000 respondents from 50 cities which included perceptions of local markets, job opportunities, governance, cultural richness and quality of life. MasterCard ranked 75 cities across the globe using data on legal/political framework, economic stability, business and finance, knowledge creation and livability.

² The most notable studies dealing with greatness relied on a city’s incorporated boundaries (Mumford, 1961; Robson and Regan, 1972; Weber, 1958). Municipal boundaries are also politically, socially and economically more coherent than metropolitan areas. In the United States incorporated boundaries are also less subject to radical change than metropolitan boundaries (subject to frequent redefinitions by the Bureau of the Census because of suburban growth). Each of the four cities is large enough within its municipal boundaries to warrant an examination of this kind. In terms of area San Francisco, stands out as the smallest city with just 47 square miles. Our other cities are large enough for a fair assessment, ranging from over 200 to more than 400 square miles. Chicago holds 227 square miles; New York 304 and Los Angeles, 469 square miles. Los Angeles holds one of the largest areas for a major American city, allowing us to take into account of a full panoply of activities and variations in spatial configuration.

migrants from all parts of the world. Each wave of immigration has put down its own stratum of achievement. Irish, Italians, Jews, Blacks and Puerto Ricans built the city's economic base. Asians and Hispanics have reinvigorated the city with a new sense of entrepreneurship. New York's cosmopolitanism goes beyond the contributions of its immigrants. The city is home to the United Nations and hosts large numbers of foreign correspondents and diplomats, diverse religious institutions and exotic street musicians. Add to this an influx of migrants from other parts of the country and the "coming out" of the Gay population, and we can very well understand why this polyglot city is amongst the most socially liberal in the country.

Los Angeles reflects a very different kind of cosmopolitanism. While it does hold a large immigrant population, the majority is Hispanic. Other immigrants also hail from Asia and parts of the Middle East. That said, the city's cosmopolitanism does not solely hinge on people from other lands, but on large influxes of American citizens from the East, Midwest and South. Much of Los Angeles was built on 50 years of migration to the Sunbelt. These same migrants created the city's low density neighborhoods, developed its industry and crowd its vast freeways. The city's cosmopolitanism has been constructed on newcomers, who created a uniquely suburban city. Its critics see Angelenos as an aggressive lot who despoil the landscape and would do anything to turn a profit (Davis, 1992). Its defenders view the city as embracing the values of freedom, democracy and upward mobility (Dear, 2000, 2002).

San Francisco achieves its cosmopolitanism in altogether different ways than either New York or Los Angeles. Like many American cities, old San Francisco was settled by foreign stock from Italy, Germany, Ireland and Russia. But much of that identification is gone and replaced by a different, more controversial profile. For some San Francisco is a trendy, leftist, Gay and altogether eccentric city; for others it represents a progressive, pluralistic, middle class ideal of urban life. The city is all of this and perhaps more. Nobody describes this social profile better than DeLeon (1992) who observes that in San Francisco "Everything is *pluribus*, nothing is *unum*. Hyperpluralism reigns. That means mutual tolerance is essential, social learning is inevitable, innovation is likely and democracy is hard work" (DeLeon, 1992, p. 13). This attitude has a powerful effect on how San Francisco presents itself to the outside world.

Again, Chicago seems to slip in between all of our cities with a little bit of everything. It was not always that way. Chicago was a city split between traditional business located in "The Loop", patrician classes living along Lake Michigan or Hyde Park and blue collar ethnic neighborhoods (Irish and East European). Blacks also constituted a group unto itself and were heavily concentrated on the city's South Side. Up through much of the 20th century, Chicago was a gruff place, given to clannishness and corruption. But then the city's social complexion changed. A new generation of well educated, middle class professionals sprung from its ethnic neighborhoods and mixed with newcomers from other parts of the country. While the city retains its neighborhood identity it has loosened up and taken on a "new political culture"—one that is socially liberal, highly mobile, anxious for public amenities and open to the rest of the world (Clark and Hoffman-Martinet, 1998).

Concentration

As mentioned earlier, in taking up the idea of concentration we consider both demographic density and productive mass. Parts of New York are the densest of any city in the United States. Manhattan's density of more than 70,000 people per square mile is extraordinary—even by European standards. Even excluding Manhattan, the rest of the city's density reaches nearly 24,000 per square mile (US Bureau of the Census, 2000). As for productive mass, Manhattan lies at the heart of New York's industrial prowess and within it Times

Square provides the city with a real epicenter—one that draws the world's attention every day and is especially uproarious every New Year's Eve. Every workday, nearly 1.4 million commuters avail themselves of the city's complex subway system, by far the largest in the country (US Bureau of the Census, 2005, 2007). Manhattan's business districts mix freely with residential use as do business districts in downtown Brooklyn, Jamaica, Queens and Fordham Road in the Bronx. Save for the less populated Staten Island, most of New York is continuously developed.

On the other side of the continent, San Francisco is also well packed with an average density of 16,000 people per square mile (US Bureau of the Census, 2000). Its productive mass is facilitated by an abundance of trolleys, buses, and rail transit. San Francisco's mass transit carries more than 120,000 commuters to all parts of the city (US Bureau of the Census, 2005, 2007). The focal points of San Francisco are to be found in its downtown skyscrapers and along its waterfront. Despite these high points, San Francisco's concentration is altogether different from New York's. This is a city which invokes moratoria on the construction of office towers and takes restrictions on building heights seriously. Rather than imposing mega structures, San Francisco charms its way into the circle of concentrated cities. Its small shops and distinct neighborhoods are matched by a patch-quilt of more than thirty mixed use, tightly packed communities.

It is not by coincidence that Chicago inspired Park's and Burgess' (1925) theory of concentric zones. While the composition of Chicago's concentric zones has changed, its facility for diagnosing urban land uses is still intact. The city's average density of 12,750 residents per square mile says much for its concentration, but so too does its exciting new business climate (US Bureau of the Census, 2000). Chicago's productive mass is cosseted by parks, beaches and street entertainment. Clark (1999) rightfully labels the downtown as a place for "trees and real violins". Underground and elevated rail lines carry more than 100,000 commuters daily (US Bureau of the Census, 2005, 2007). Chicago's architectural heritage has been brought to the fore by additions to its skyline. The downtown is now filled with residential apartment buildings and new neighborhoods have blossomed, forming near continuous stretches of mixed use development.

By the criterion of concentration Los Angeles remains an outlier. Its density of nearly 8000 people per square mile is less than one third of New York's, half of San Francisco's and roughly two thirds of Chicago's (US Bureau of the Census, 2000). Los Angeles has no real center and no conspicuous focal points that serve as a referent for motorists, cyclists or pedestrians. Its downtown is small, non-descript and its neighborhoods of low slung bungalows are indistinct. The city's rail is in a nascent stage of development, carrying just 6000 commuters daily (US Bureau of the Census, 2005, 2007). Los Angeles' productive mass is spread around it rather than within it, and its transportation well suits that distribution. Angelenos depend upon automobiles and a vast highway system to work, play and socialize. The city's extremely long blocks, intended to accommodate vehicular traffic, thwart pedestrian life. We have here a landscape characterized by segregated uses—solidly residential areas in one place, malls in another and other activities located at a distance from housing or shopping. What might appear to be liabilities for some people are celebrated by others, who see Los Angeles as the seat of "post modernism" where everything is discontinuous and held together by the twin strands of freeways and cyberspace. Some scholars believe the city has ushered into the current age a paradigmatic break with traditional forms of development (Dear, 2000, 2002).

Charisma

If charisma can be contained within symbol, New York has much to offer. It is often identified by a dramatic skyline, whose

images appear in photos and film. It is a city that broadcasts itself through song and literature; it has an authentic culture and its characterization as “The Big Apple” conveys an authenticity about the opportunities to be realized in America's largest city. The city's unique culture contributes mightily to its appeal and to the mindset it evokes. New York has few rivals in its ability to lure adventurous youth, ambitious entrepreneurs and avant-gardes artists.

Chicago has come to embrace the accolade of America's “second city” because doing so gives it an added advantage. The city has found its identity as the big city that is not New York—more manageable, cleaner and more affordable with a hominess of its own. If the song “New York, New York” echoes lyrics like, “If you can make it there you can make it anywhere”, the “second city's” rejoinder is, “Chicago . . . the kinda town that won't let you down”. Chicago is also filled with opportunities and sophistication. Its magnificent architecture, its sports teams and its celebration in story have enabled the city to fill the promise of greatness. Corporations move their headquarters to Chicago because its image now allows for a prestigious location and its geography provides the advantage of easy access to anywhere in the world. It is this combination of psychic appeal and practicality that makes the word “second” sound like the best.

San Francisco's appeal is not easily duplicated. Its Victorian housing, Bay area location and tapestry of different cultures give the city a special meaning. The city's charisma can be found in its romance and portrayal of its streets. San Francisco is known as a city that tolerates almost every lifestyle. Indeed, the city's acceptance of what might elsewhere be considered “deviant” gives it a special sense of social civility. Much of that civility is refracted in the respect with which San Franciscans treat their environment. This is a city that tore down an ugly elevated highway despite the cries of business.

Los Angeles is a city whose charisma can only be described with ambivalence. On the one hand it has few identifiable symbols and one struggles to find a recognizable sobriquet for that city. Recent arrivals will also complain about the city's shortage of “character”, its paucity of intellectual life and the lack of old bookstores. Yet, Los Angeles does have plenty of devotees. Its sunny weather, beaches and Hollywood glamor provide Los Angeles with enough cache to make it appealing. Its surfeit of privatized spaces allows for a huge variety of tastes, proclivities and adventures. Los Angeles' may have inaugurated a different kind of charisma than is traditionally accepted—all of it made possible by a fast moving, free and open environment. Some European scholars, very much accustomed to staid, compact cities, find Los Angeles to be refreshingly spontaneous (Kourchid and Rhein, 1994).

Applying the 4Cs to four cities

We now take a closer view of our cities in tandem with one another. Any effort to portray greatness by numbers is likely to be problematic because of what is selected, how a given quality is measured and whether indicators point in a certain direction. Like any other phenomenon, the indications of greatness may not always turn in the same direction. To use health as an example, an individual may suffer from hypertension, but in other respects show very favorable signs of physical excellence. In much the same way, a city may fall short on some measures but be outstanding in other ways. It is then important to understand overall patterns and not be bound to a single measure. Moreover, measures should be understood in context, both in terms of our previous discussion and for what is significant for a city in the 21st century.

Nowadays a city that is current would have a commanding economic presence. The measures for this include employment, gross metropolitan product; the presence of Fortune 500 companies (eco-

nomic magnitude and leadership) as well as high tech businesses and patent entries (cutting edge innovation). In the same manner cosmopolitanism could be seen in a city's international posture. Here the measures include immigrants, foreign tourists (circulation of individuals from overseas) as well as international airline passengers (world transportation hub), foreign embassies (ability to project abroad) and global network connections (international business flows). Concentration has many of the components of an earlier age, except that modern construction has allowed vertical development (office towers, apartment buildings) and cities are challenged by suburbanization. The measures for concentration take into account both density and productive mass. They include central city density and the size and proportion of the downtown area (ability to cluster people, industries, etc.) as well as density gradients (the relative importance of the center vis-à-vis the periphery) and use of public transit (the compactness destinations). Finally, in the contemporary world charisma is associated with popular appeal. The indicators for charisma include numbers of Google hits (interest and recognition), desirability of the city as a residential location (youthful and upwardly mobile appeal), the richness of public amenities (entertainment, restaurant and sports appeal), a Bohemian factor reflecting careers in the arts (cultural appeal) and the frequency a city appears in film (general audience appeal).

Table 1 presents each of our 4Cs with respect to New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles. The table displays various measures by their raw numbers or an established score (see footnotes for the table definitions). Also shown by a slash (/) is the ranking of our four cities, relative to other major cities in the United States.³

Ranking New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles by the 4Cs

While not surprising, it is worth noting that the prominence of a city within a given attribute is somewhat consistent down the line. That is, cities with a high degree of currency will not only do well on gross metropolitan product (GMP) but enjoy the largest number of jobs and serve as the location for the most Fortune 500 companies. New York captures the top slot on most of these variables, though San Francisco by far exceeds the other cities in per capita income.

As we proceed to cosmopolitanism we see high numbers of immigrants together with high numbers of foreign tourists, a large amount of international travel, a surfeit of embassies and consulates and tens of thousands of global connections. Again, New York is predominant, followed on many of these measures by Los Angeles, Chicago and San Francisco.

The attribute of concentration is also revealing. New York is the most consistently concentrated city with extremely high densities, a commanding downtown (size, area, employment) a sharp density gradient and a high reliance on public transit. Chicago and San Francisco do well on most of these measures, especially population densities, downtown size, density gradients and public transit. As expected, Los Angeles' pattern of settlement is more spread than its sister cities. Its relatively low density gradient tells us that its pattern of settlement is fairly uniform—there are few demographic peaks and valleys in that city and it has the highest proportion of automobile use.

³ To capture major cities we include a large number of cities with the highest population plus New Orleans and Santa Fe. Their respective populations are as follows: New York (8246,310) Los Angeles (3770,590) Chicago (2740,224) Houston (2034,749) Philadelphia (1454,382) Phoenix (1440,018) San Antonio (1267,984) San Diego (1264,263) Dallas (1187,603) Detroit (951,270) San Jose (898,901) Jacksonville (797,966) Indianapolis (790,815) San Francisco (757,604) Austin (725,306) Columbus (724,095) Memphis (650,100) Charlotte (649,578) Baltimore (639,493) Fort Worth (635,612) Boston (600,980) Washington, DC (585,267) Milwaukee (584,007) Seattle (565,809) El Paso (563,662) New Orleans (288,113) and Santa Fe 73,056)

Table 1

Ranking New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles by the 4Cs GMP: 2005–2007 average in 2007 Dollars US Conference of Mayors (US \$ Billion); employment: 2005–2007 ACS Estimate US Census (City); Fortune 500 company: CNN Money (average 2007–2006); per capita income: 2005–2007 ACS Estimate US Census (City); immigrants: 2005–2007 ACS Estimate US Census (City); foreign tourists: (average 2007–2006) US Department of Commerce; Airline Passengers International: (average 2007–2005) US Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics; global network connectivities: Taylor and Lang (2005); embassy and foreign consular offices: 2008 US Department of State; CC Density: 2000 US Census; size of downtown: 2006 Demographia; central city population proportion downtown: Birch 2005 & 2005–2007 ACS Estimate US Census; population density gradient: Bertaud & Malpezzi, 2003, p. 20; CBD share of urban area employment: 2006 Demographia; Google hits: <http://www.google.com> 2009; % commuting to work via public transportation: 2005–2007 ACS Estimate US Census (City); Bohemian index ranking: Florida (2005) *Cities and the Rise of the Creative Class*, pages 177–178 and Florida, 2001. Technology and Tolerance: The Importance of Diversity to High-Tech Growth, Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, Brookings Institution; amenity richness: (Thomas, 2007. America's Fun Cities: methodology <http://www.bizjournals.com/specials/pages/140.html>; Internet movie database titles: <http://www.imdb.com> retrieved April 22, 2009; Top 10: 2006 Horizon Insights).

	New York, NY		Chicago, IL		San Francisco, CA		Los Angeles, CA	
<i>Currency</i>								
GMP (US \$Billion)	1166.40	1/25	498.6	3/25	292.6	8/25	687.2	2/25
Employment total	3720,248	1/25	1242,375	3/25	418,914	11/25	1766,442	2/25
Fortune 500 company	45	1/25	11	4/25	6	8/25	4	14/25
Per capita income	26,975	9/25	24,084	13/25	40,533	1/25	24,380	12/25
Top 50 high-tech cities	4.23	3/25	3.76	1/5	1.45	11/25	5.11	2/25
US patent grants	1704	8/25	2929	3/25	1700	9/25	2348	4/25
<i>Cosmopolitanism</i>								
Immigrants	3028,148	1/25	594,841	3/25	270,481	9/25	1509,764	2/25
Foreign tourists	6932,500	1/25	1104,500	5/25	2131,500	3/25	2583,000	2/25
Airline passengers international	20,990,874	1/25	7760,843	4/25	8129,389	3/25	16,302,296	2/25
Embassy and foreign consular offices	129	2/25	43	4/25	44	3/25	27	6/25
Global network connectivities	61,895	1/25	39,025	2/25	32,178	4/25	38,009	3/25
<i>Concentration</i>								
Central city density (per Square Mile)	26,403	1/25	12,750	3/25	16,634	2/25	7877	8/25
	70,595	Manhattan						
	23,733	NYC w/o Man.						
Size of downtown (Square Miles)	7.82	1/25	3.36	2/25	2.34	6/25	1.25	11/25
Central city population proportion downtown	2.00%	2/5	2.60%	8/25	5.70%	2/25	1%	15/25
Population density gradient	–7.30%	1/8	–2.40%	7/8	–5.30%	2/8	–2.60%	6/8
CBD share of urban area employment	20.10%	1/50	14.30%	9/50	12.20%	13/50	2.50%	49/50
% Commuting to work via public transportation	54.56%	1/25	25.90%	6/25	32.20%	4/25	11.00%	9/25
<i>Charisma</i>								
Google hits (millions)	1100	1/25	447	2/25	315	4/27	361	4/25
Bohemian index ranking	3	3/27	30	10/27	8	4/27	2	2/27
Amenity richness	12.26	1/50	8.46	3/50	6.29	6/50	6.88	4/50
Internet movie database titles	3249	1/25	467	5/25	563	3/27	1010	2/25
Top 10 most desirable cities	21%	3/10	13%	5/10	13%	5/10	40%	1/10

GMP: Gross metropolitan product is the market value of all final goods and services produced within the metropolitan area (2005–2007 average in 2007 dollars).

Employment: Represents the total employment for the city proper by US Census definition (2005–2007 ACS estimate).

Fortune 500: Represents the number of Fortune 500 companies within a city (2006–2007 average).

Per capita income: Represents the per capita income for the city proper by US Census definition (2005–2007 ACS estimate).

Top 50 high-tech cities, by size: Score represents the percentage of national high-tech output of the area for the year 1998. The percentage ranges from 5.79% for San Jose to less than 1% in El Paso, TX (1998).

US patents grants: US patent grants are the number of utility patents awarded for a city during the year 1999 (1999).

Immigrants: Represents the total number of immigrants for the city proper by US Census definition (2005–2007 ACS estimate).

Foreign tourists: Represents the total number of overseas visitors to the respective city (2006–2007 average).

Airline passengers international: Represents the total number of international passengers for each city's airport. In the case where a city has two airports the totals were combined. New York (JFK, LGA) Chicago (MDW, ORD) San Francisco (SFO) Los Angeles (LAX) (2005–2007 average).

Global network connectivities: Taylor and Lang (2005), p. 4 "Defined cities broadly as 'city-regions' or metropolitan areas, but in practice the service offices considered were largely concentrated in the central city, especially in downtowns, p. 3 "The 'connectivities' represents the interconnectedness of cities via firm location in six key producer service sectors—accounting, advertising, banking/finance, insurance, law, and management consulting" (2000).

Embassy and foreign consular offices: Represents the total number of diplomatic offices in each of the respective cities (2008).

Central city density: Represents the population density of the city proper by US Census definition (2000).

Central city proportion downtown: The percentage of central city residents living downtown (2005–2007 ACS estimate).

Population density gradient: Is the percentage change in the population density of a city for every one mile increase from the CBD (2003).

% Commuting to work via public transportation: Percentage of workforce commuting via public modes of transportation. Includes: bus or trolley bus, streetcar or trolley car, subway or elevated, railroad and ferryboat. Does not include taxi (2005–2007 ACS estimate).

Bohemian index ranking: (Florida, 2005, p. 118) "The Bohemian Index is based on occupational data from the 1990 US Decennial Census Public Use Microdata Sample (1% and 5%). It includes the following occupations: authors, designers, musicians and composers, actors and directors, craft-artists, painters, sculptors, and artist printmakers, photographers, dancers, and artists, performers, and related workers. The Index is basically a location quotient that measures the percentage of bohemians in a city compared to the national population of bohemians divided by the percent of total population in a region compared to the total national population" (1990).

Amenity richness: "The amenity richness index examined the top 50 largest cities and examined the total number of businesses with at least five employees and the ratio of such business per 100,000 residents in seven categories: shopping, food and drink, culture, popular entertainment, gambling, high-impact sports and low-impact sports. Each city was compared against the study group's average scores in all seven categories. Above-average performances received positive scores, while below-average results received negative scores. Category scores were combined to determine each market's overall rank. Final scores ranged from 12.26 points for New York City to –7.73 points for Memphis" (Thomas, 2007. America's Fun Cities: Methodology. <http://www.bizjournals.com/specials/pages/140.html> (2005).

Internet movie database titles: Number of titles (movies, film, TV) where the city is listed as a keyword for the respective film. The keyword indicates the city was an important aspect (subject matter, setting, or backdrop) of the film either in its entirety or in parts (2009).

Top 10 most desirable cities: The results from a nationwide survey asking 1359 online interviews from respondents between the ages of 22 and 41 who had achieved at least a Bachelor's degree. Respondents were residents of one of the 50 largest MSAs in the nation. The survey asked the respondents where they would most like to live in the United States (Horizon InSight, 2006) (2006).

The last attribute charisma meets some expectations but surprises us on others. Once again, New York is consistently at the top. By far it has the largest number of Google hits and does well relative to other cities on its Bohemian ranking. New York also scores at or near the top on amenities, film mentions and as a desirable location. Chicago and San Francisco also acquit themselves well on most of these measures and run fairly close to each other. Los Angeles does surprise us by exceeding many of its sister cities on the Bohemian index, as a desirable location and its frequency of film mentions. Los Angeles' position on some of these indicators is pregnant with implications for greatness (see below).

Of considerable interest is the position of our four cities relative to other major cities in the United States. These comparisons confirm the relative greatness of our four cities at a national level. In most cases we find our cities among the top fifth in the country, sometimes occupying seriatim the top four places. Out of 22 measures and 88 observations found in the table, our cities were amongst the top fifth in the nation 71.5% of the time. Other cities that occasionally traded the fourth position with one of our cities were Boston and Washington, DC. Some switching occurred on selective measures. Otherwise, our four cities were in good stead at the nation's pinnacle.

Under currency, New York, Chicago and Los Angeles held this ranking on four of six measures. San Francisco satisfied the top fifth ranking just once, though its per capita income was the highest of all major cities in the nation. Under cosmopolitanism, New York held this position on all five measures. Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles found themselves in the top fifth on four of five measures. Under concentration, New York held the first or second position on all six measures. Chicago was in the top fifth on two measures and San Francisco on three measures. By contrast, Los Angeles did not meet the top fifth criterion on any of the concentration measures. The finish of this listing, charisma turned out to be quite interesting. Chicago did quite well on three of five measures. As one might expect, New York was among the top fifth on all five measures, and it was joined by San Francisco. Despite the conventional belief that Los Angeles lacked "character", that city distinguished itself by climbing to the top fifth on all five of the charismatic measures. Here we see that "character" can be translated into charisma in altogether different ways. We consider this result together with others in the next section.

Conclusions: paths to greatness

Whether we accept that a single large nation can have several great cities or not, we can learn a great deal from trying to identify that phenomenon. For one, within the context of their respective eras great cities have enjoyed a global scope, but the converse does not hold—being a global city does not necessarily qualify it as a great city. By definition global cities are well connected with other parts of the globe. In this respect Singapore is an extraordinary efficiency/communications machine that reaches across the world, but it lacks the essential of charisma.

Second, this brief examination raises the issue of whether a great city also requires being a large city. Certainly, great cities have been sizeable and a small city will find it difficult to meet the criteria for all 4Cs. We see this obstacle popping up in the smallest of our cities, San Francisco, especially as it pertains to the weight of its economy (currency). Nevertheless, cities of lesser size can be quite high on charisma and even achieve greatness. Not only does San Francisco fare reasonably well on the charismatic criterion, but other medium sized cities like Boston, New Orleans and Seattle exceed many of their larger rivals on various measures

(Google hits, internet movies).⁴ Additionally, while we might have expected that very large cities would have a distinct advantage on measures of cultural richness, these same medium sized cities generally do better than their much larger counterparts.⁵

Third, we should consider that a city does not have to be at the very pinnacle of every attribute to be great. It does however have to be prominent on enough counts to claim greatness. Chicago demonstrates that a city can distinguish itself by finding a niche position. Chicago is our only city not to achieve the first rank on any attribute. Notwithstanding that shortcoming, Chicago attained distinction by consistently staying near the top in every attribute and coupling that standing to a unique identity. This tells us that finding a proper niche and making the most of it can be a key factor. Chicago was able to bring itself to distinction by dint of its natural geography, its agglomerations of capital and human talent, its built environment and skillful politics (Simpson, 2001). This extraordinary combination of indigenous, structural factors and human agency is not easily duplicated.

Fourth, Los Angeles is instructive for understanding what greatness might look like in the 21st century. The issue is all the more important because unlike the 19th century inspiration behind New York, Chicago and San Francisco, Los Angeles is a product of the 20th century (Abu Lughod, 1999). Its post modernist defenders often see it as a paradigmatic break and as posing an altogether different model for greatness. A more careful scrutiny tells us something else. For all the descriptions of it as a radically decentralized, post modern city, Los Angeles is densely populated (at least by American standards). Its current density of almost 8000 people per square mile makes it one of the more heavily settled cities in the country, allowing some to claim that Los Angeles is much like New York, Chicago and San Francisco (Fulton et al., 2001). While Los Angeles is denser than most would imagine, the use of these averages over large metropolitan areas can be misleading. Clearly, such calculations wash out the very sharp differences that do exist at the core of these cities. More significantly, concentration goes beyond counting numbers of people per square mile and embraces productive mass, which is quite spread in Los Angeles. Concentration also touches on a host of other factors such as centrality, continuity, mixed land uses and mass transit. By these criteria Los Angeles falls short.

The truth of the matter is that Los Angeles is neither conventionally "concentrated" nor classically "sprawled" but rather a hybrid. At the risk of adding still more terminology to a field burdened by neologisms, Los Angeles might best be described by (a) *density* that is (b) *extensive* both of which, in turn, are (c) *auto dependent*. These three ideas are summarized in the acronym DEAD. Some would argue that this developmental form produces immense liabilities like traffic congestion, moribund streets and a lifeless downtown (Eidlin, 2005). This view faults Los Angeles as a city devoid of the collective use of public space. Others see this developmental form as free, fluid and convenient. This view hails Los Angeles as a city suited for a new age of flexibility and individual choice. Our own purposes are narrower and address the issue of whether DEAD fits a future model of "city greatness" or alternatively whether DEAD disappears as a city matures (Los Angeles as a city in transition).

While the evidence is incomplete, it appears that Los Angeles has adopted more familiar forms of concentration. Over the past

⁴ Regarding Google hits the ranks for these cities are: Boston 5/27; New Orleans 22/27; and Seattle 13/27. When it comes to Internet movies sites the ranks are: Boston 6/27; New Orleans 7/27; and Seattle 9/27. These cities with populations of less than 600,000 hold their own on most of these counts relative to cities with twice their population like Houston, Phoenix and San Diego.

⁵ Regarding amenities the rankings for lesser sized cities are as follows. Boston 2/50; New Orleans 8/50; and Seattle 5/50. Surprisingly, some larger cities had negative scores (below average) on amenities. Houston ranked 18/50; Phoenix 21/50 and San Diego 16/50. On a broader note among the cities examined the R^2 correlation between size and amenities is a modest 0.34.

40 years, its densities have increased by 49%. Unlike other cities whose population drifted into rural land, newcomers to Los Angeles have chosen established neighborhoods. There is something both new and unusual about this trend. Compared to traditional cities that grew from the center outward, Los Angeles demonstrates an inverted pattern of growing from the periphery back toward an in-filling of its core. This pattern of in-fill can also be seen in recent efforts to bolster its downtown with office towers, residence and tourist attractions. All of which are re-reinforced by an embryonic and fragmented mass transit system of buses, light rail and underground transit.

Exactly where this in-fill will take Los Angeles is unclear. Los Angeles will never be a New York, Chicago or San Francisco, but neither does it conform to a sprawled Phoenix or Albuquerque. Los Angeles' accomplishments and attraction in its DEAD form already deserves recognition, so we might think about this urban form as a possible model. By the same token, Los Angeles is also evolving as it acquires greatness, and this suggests a certain striving toward more concentration. If that city's drift toward more concentration does continue—even though truncated—it may well be the exception that proves the rule about the inherent advantages of conventional cities. Either of these are open possibilities that only time and further observation will decide.

Last, we should recognize that most cities will not achieve greatness nor should they endeavor to do so. Only handfuls are capable of achieving greatness. While this may seem self evident, many smaller cities in the United States and elsewhere continue to mimic those at the top. It is not uncommon to see this imitation in new convention halls that lay vacant, airports that are relabeled as “international” hubs but have very few overseas flights; and designer buildings that pop through lonely skylines.

There are serious costs to pursuing greatness when it is not realistically achievable. To take one example of great city mimicry, cities across America have engaged in a rash of convention hall construction. In the space of the last decade spending on convention centers doubled to \$2.4 billion annually and availability increased by 50% (Sanders, 2005). So severe was the competition that one scholar likened it to an “arms race” between cities (Sanders, 2005, p. 1).

The extant hope of these cities was that hosting conventions would bring fame, raise revenues and build monuments of greatness. Yet the race to build convention halls turned out to be a race to the bottom, as the oversupply of convention space exceeded the demand. Attendance in some cities plummeted by more than 40% from the previous period. More telling was the debt cities incurred as new convention halls lay vacant. In addition to paying off bonds, cities were obliged to meet ongoing expenses for maintenance and utilities. Besides these burdens were the opportunity costs missed because cities granted free land and tax abatements to developers.

Our brief exercise should teach policy makers that greatness is a rarity, to be admired but not necessarily copied. Attempting to emulate the impossible can be corrupting and wasteful. Better for a city to be what it is and aspire to be the best regional center or best small town than pretend to be what it is not. Knowing a city's potential, appreciating it and making the most of it is every bit as valuable.

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