

# Which Future? Strategic Visions For American Cities

Raffaella Nanetti\*

## Abstract

*The deep and widespread financial and economic crisis that started in 2007 has spawned powerful protest movements across the US. Some of the protest grass root movements are pushed forward by the crisis in giving up on that very notion by embracing a no growth and wealth redistribution approach. Other movements that are ideologically critical of public policies have been prompted by the crisis to return to an even more pronounced free market approach and to the anti-city posture. A distinctive lack of vision for the future of cities has become the common denominator of both movements.*

*A constructive thinking for the future of American cities suggests a positive role with regard to cities so that they can continue to be the levers of knowledge production for a sustainable development.*

**Keywords:** Globalization; American Cities; New Urban Development; Economic Growth

## 1. Cities, Economic Growth and Crisis

During the second half of the last century the social sciences elaborated and mainstreamed into the public policy debate the modern, twin concepts of ‘progress and growth with development’ as the engines of an inevitable, expansive and uninterrupted process of improvement in the quality of life. Associated with the two concepts has been the central role of cities and urban conurbations in igniting the process and insuring development outcomes around the world, starting from the ‘developed nations’ and trickling down to the ‘developing nations’.

The deep and widespread financial and economic crisis that started in 2007 has dangerously eroded that strongly held belief, and more so in the United States where unimpeded progress has been at the very core of the country’s national identity since its foundation. The crisis has spawned powerful protest movements across the country. Some of the protest grass root movements are pushed forward by the crisis in giving up on that very notion by embracing a no growth and wealth redistribution approach. Other movements that are ideologically critical of public

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\* Professor of Urban Planning and Policy, University of Illinois at Chicago ([esoclab@aol.com](mailto:esoclab@aol.com))

policies have been prompted by the crisis to return to an even more pronounced free market approach and to the anti-city posture that has been so much part of the United States' cultural history. However, what appears to bring the two strands of movements together is their sharing of a perspective that looks backwards rather than forwards. A distinctive lack of vision for the future of cities has become the common denominator of both movements.

Countering the trend, this article is concerned with positive and constructive thinking for the future of American cities, therefore suggesting not only ideas but also concrete paths for the improvement of the quality of life across the territorial communities of cities and their urbanized regions. The present moment is fraught with negatives and uncertainties as well as with the fear of a severe double dip economic crisis: skyrocketing unemployment, increasing numbers of unskilled and inactive youth (the 'neet' generation), demonstrations and occupation of public spaces, and even rioting and episodes of cities burning are among the visible signs of the widespread malaise. The need is to look for a positive role with regard to cities so that they can continue to play the role they have long fulfilled in the history of mankind: to be the levers for a turnaround at this historical juncture when the production of development 'knowledge' is once again key for development, and, in turn, an engine for a type of development that is economically and environmentally sustainable. What is necessary are strategic visions that translate into realistic and responsible development scenarios.

This article focuses on American cities and proceeds in three steps. First, it assesses the transformative trends impacting American (and other) cities, secondly, it elaborates on two conceptual tools for the rethinking of the future of cities, and third, it suggests a taxonomy of visions to promote positive change in American cities for sustainability in the future. The article is informed by the following argument: *The ongoing economic crisis underlines that American cities may have a real chance to change. To this end, they need to incrementally but decisively move away from the 'American way of life' model that they have for so long endorsed and recently even more so accentuated; this model does not work any longer.*

## **2. Globalization and Transformative Trends in American Cities**

Much has happened in a relatively short period of time to bring American cities to the threshold of contemplating radical changes. Fact finding in this regard points to and singles out in particular two interconnected phenomena: on the one hand, there is the most severe financial crisis since 1929 that has turned into a prolonged and disruptive economic crisis endangering the wellbeing of American families; and on the other hand there is the realization that the neo-liberal phase of economic globalization of the last three decades has brought massive transformations to American cities that are politically, socially, and environmentally unsustainable. While the crisis is visible and is dwelled upon in most of the media and public policy debate, it is only one of the consequences of the neo-liberal phase of globalization that has also produced many other transformations. In particular, the current phase of globalization has brought about four transformative trends to American cities and their quality of life:

1. *Socio-economic duality*. American cities have become ‘dual cities’ in terms of income distribution, more than ever before in the post-WWII period. Social dislocation and poverty versus status and wealth is in evidence due to the impact of de-industrialization and economic restructuring and the resulting dual labor markets that characterize them.
2. *Spatial duality*. American cities have become ‘dual cities’ in terms of the unequal spatial distribution of their assets. Attractive cultural and communication infrastructure in the post-modern and post-industrial city cores contrasts with the declining ‘grey’ city areas. It is the case of the ‘tourist’ and the ‘financial’ city versus the older neighborhoods.
3. *Growing racial tensions and threat to democratic accountability*. The rapidly changing demographic composition of American cities under the pressure of new arrivals from South America makes immigration a dominant issue, sparking racial confrontations and radical policy measures.
4. *Unsustainable growth patterns*. Dualities in American cities have increased the occurrence of ‘exit’ type of spatial impacts at the level of their metropolitan areas. They are exemplified by the evidence of mis-matches between ‘living’ and ‘work’ arrangements, and by the extreme patterns of urban sprawl with the continuous growth of ex-burbs.

The traits that have characterized the current phase of globalization are well known. They are subsumed into key neo liberal economic principles, specially the reliance on free trade, the de-regulation of capital markets and tax reduction measures. These are principles that have been largely embraced by the urban planning profession as well and have accentuated the private consumption traits of the ‘American way of life’ model that has been best exemplified by the middle class of the American metropolitan areas. Thus, among others, since the 1980s the urban planning profession has embraced:

- objectives of growth and efficiency to be the basis for planning as the response to the economic downturn and sustained ‘white flight’ from the cities during the 1960s and 1970s;
- the reversal of the ‘social agenda’ for planning of the 1960s, critiqued for being unproductive and producing dependency;
- the mandate for planners to spur ‘economic growth’ in cities, by leveraging city core locations and cultural assets ;
- the notion of the need to attract the middle class back to the city core, reversing the ‘white flight’ of the 60s and 70s;
- the conviction of the effectiveness of reducing the public sector’s role in urban development, in terms of plans, regulations and resources;
- the approach of providing incentives to business to reinvest in the city core;
- the option of privileging large scale mixed use revitalization schemes in the city core;
- the approach of greater reliance on NGOs and charitable actions to meet the needs of the urban poor; and
- the privatization of public service delivery, in line with the reduction of the public sector role and the belief of achieving greater efficiency and cost effectiveness for urban consumers.

### 3. Rethinking the Future of American Cities: De-Globalization and two Conceptual Tools

In political, academic, and policy circles the economic crisis has not only prompted many to analyze and dissect the differential nature and the impacts of the current phase of globalization but it has also spurred an ongoing debate on ‘de-globalization’, in the search for new ideas and means to respond to the crisis and reverse the negative course of globalization. Two roads to de-globalization are emerging in the American public debate.

- *Negativist: de-globalization to cancel globalization.* On the conceptual level, this road negates the very essence of globalization as the contemporary phenomenon of the interconnection and transformation of the world economy caused by the revolution in communication technology. Politically, this road in the extreme essentially leads to: policies of ‘autarchy’; ideological pre-eminence of ‘my place’; measures favoring localism; attitudes of social exclusion; changes toward a minimalist government, and, ultimately, stronger orientation toward individual consumption.
- *Constructivist: de-globalization to redirect globalization.* A second road to de-globalization on the conceptual level acknowledges the transformative phenomenon of globalization but not the inevitability of its territorial manifestations. Politically, this road leads to: policies of ‘interdependence’; ideological pre-eminence of ‘territorial strengths’; measures to promote and safeguard territorial assets; attitudes of social inclusion; change to governance and a ‘common goods’ policy approach; and, ultimately, the devising of territorially specific strategies to produce sustainable infrastructure provision and services that increase ‘public consumption’.

We focus now on the ‘constructivist’ road to de-globalization emerging from this debate, while it shares with others the assessment that the ‘negativist’ road not only is empirically unrealistic but also developmentally counter-productive.

#### A constructivist road map: direction of change for American cities:

Any set of territorial policies should incorporate ‘hard’ as well as ‘soft’ types of interventions. Examples of ‘hard’ interventions are: multi-modal transport, IT and energy infrastructure, R&D infrastructure, air quality and brownfield recovery infrastructure, and cultural and social service facilities. Examples of ‘soft’ interventions are: land use laws, pollution controls, R&TD activities, and public-private partnerships.

#### 1. **HARD-** interventions

*US cities: need to move to change the orientation of capital investment*

**From:** ‘consumption friendly infrastructure (A1) and supportive policies (B1)’

Examples: (A1) free highways; (B1) low density urban development

That is: the production of public goods that cater to individual use

**To:** ‘local asset friendly infrastructure (C1) and supportive policies (D1)’

Examples: (C1) mass transit; (D1) TOD (Transit oriented development and smart growth policies); greening projects and ‘meanwhile use’ projects for vacant premises.

That is: the production of public goods that cater to public consumption

## 2. **SOFT**- interventions

**US cities need to move to change the target of their HR (human resources) investment**

**From:** ‘basic skills friendly target (A2); and supportive policies (B2)’

Examples: (A2) lower drop out rates; (B2) ‘social promotion’ policy

That is: insuring the maintenance of basic skills in the workforce

**To:** ‘knowledge friendly target (C2) and supportive policies (D2)’

Examples: (C2) increase college level rates; (D2) affordable life long learning and inclusion promoting policies;

That is: insuring the diffusion and upgrading of innovative skills in the workforce

To this end, our road map argues that the rethinking in American cities has to take place in terms of ‘adopting’ and ‘adapting’ to their specific territorial contexts two conceptual tools that are briefly discussed below:

- *Development rather than growth*

Different from growth which is measured by aggregate wealth creation, development is a complex, multi-dimensional concept which has come onto its own during the last few decades. Distilling from the growing development literature, we have articulated the following definition of the concept. Development is:

- Politically a *project*, underpinned by its own policy commitment, as much as growth creation is a political project;
- Territorially *significant*, in that it seeks to add value and not consume the environmental assets of a territory;
- Generationally *important*, since it aims for longitudinal sustainability;
- Territorially *specific*, because it acknowledges that every territory (locus) has its own significant and multiple assets to build upon, in the pursuit of improved living conditions;
- Comprehensively *targeted*, in that it draws on human, cultural, natural, historical, and economic-financial assets;
- Longitudinally *pursued*, for it is a process that unfolds over time;
- Normatively *guided*, by principles and rules to insure convergence of private and public efforts;
- Individually *accepted*, as the vision of development is to be shared by citizens;
- Socially *inclusive*, in that it pursues the improvement in the living conditions of all people across the territory;

- Socially *acted upon*, because the project of development is to be contributed to by organized social actors.
- *Engaged civil society and social capital for institutional performance*

Over the last several decades, the literature on an engaged civil society in public decision making has grown and evolved. In so doing, this literature has accompanied the incremental changes in the public debate and mode of thinking about, among others: representative democracy and the public interest or ‘common good’ in these modern times; the fulfilment of policy objectives of growth and equity in our complex societies; and the pro-active role that civically engaged citizens should play in contributing to policy outputs and ultimately to improving the quality of life outcomes for their territory (Reich 1990; Ostrom 1990; Putnam 1995; Leonardi, Nanetti 2008, 2010)

Since the 1980s the notion of social capital has emerged in the social sciences, and has been used to operationalize civil society engagement. Social capital is a form of capital that is not similar to other known forms of economic capital, such as financial and property assets. Introduced by the seminal article by James Coleman (Coleman, 1988) social capital affirmed itself when it was extracted empirically in a longitudinal study (Putnam, Leonardi, Nanetti 1993) of Italian regions, in which for the first time it was proven the relationship between the stock of social capital in a territorial community and the performance of its institutions in terms of socio-economic achievements.

Social capital is characterized by three specific elements. A first is ‘diffused mutual trust’ among the people and their aggregations in all spheres of life in a territorial community. Trust underlines social interaction, thus promoting more of it. A second element is the system of solidarity values and norms that are shared by the members of the territorial community and by their associations. And the third element of social capital is action-orientated, and it is expressed by the capacity of territorially based associations to act on such values and norms and be politically engaged in pursuing development objectives. Social capital is enhanced through purposive measures, in an iterative process of ‘virtuous loop’ interactions between civil society and institutions.

#### **4. Building the Future of American Cities: a Taxonomy of Strategic Visions**

The next step is for American cities to pursue the path to change by endorsing a strategic vision of the future that should inform their decision making and be congruent with their constructivist road map. We define

*strategic vision as the policy path embraced by a city in support of the priority choices for its hard and soft interventions. The city embraces its strategic vision on the basis of the assessment of the needs-problems-challenges it faces.*

A congruent strategic vision is characterized by a number of traits that single it out as being:

1. *Territorially specific*. Contextual territorial analysis underlines the vision to be pursued. A precondition is the knowledge of the needs of the territory and the challenges it faces, to be acquired through means such as a SWOT analysis.
2. *Future oriented*. The vision is at least over the medium term and beyond. The understanding is that the change pursued to fulfill it is often structural in nature and cannot be achieved in the short term.
3. *Problem solving*. The vision has a very pragmatic trait, seeking to produce change on the ground in terms of improving upon the present status of the territorial conditions. Tangible outcomes are sought.
4. *Strategically informed*. The vision targets key needs and problems whose solution is the precondition for sustainability. Thus, it makes choices and selects objectives.
5. *Operationally translated*. The vision is translated into technical programmes to be effectively and efficiently carried out. The content analysis of the programmes informs on its essence, including its knowledge base (trait 1).
6. *Ultimately, a political project*. The vision of the interventions that ought to be made is in the end a political decision, not a technical one, although the technical side should lend essential support to it. The commitment to carry it out until the outcomes are achieved is political.

On the basis of empirical work we have carried out over the last several years we have elaborated and adapted a taxonomy of eight strategic visions for American cities.

### 1) ‘Broad Based Connectivity’

a) *It envisions to tightly knit the city and its metro-area through a web of priority multi-purpose interconnections, pursued incrementally and simultaneously, in order to respond to the problem of the city’s marginal economic position within the country and to the need for more balanced development.*

b) This vision is pertinent in the city of Detroit and its metro area, now experiencing the extreme condition of the ‘donut’. It most demanding: it calls for national, state, the city and its suburbs to leverage resources in the pursuit of regional and intra-city development. The reading of the territorial contextual conditions suggests the endorsement of this vision and it should be used to face the ultimate challenge of the city’s significant territorial development gaps. The essence of the ‘broad-based connectivity’ vision is that such a challenge cannot be met by a sectoral strategy and by the city alone; rather, the condition of comparative economic underdevelopment of Detroit calls for a wide range of interconnected interventions to be pursued simultaneously for socioeconomic conditions not just to be improved but even reversed.

## **2) ‘Transport Based Connectivity’**

a) *It envisions to systematically introduce and expand the city/region transport system to make it multi-modal and mass transit oriented, lower energy consumption and carbon emission, and be the driver for new economic growth and sustainability.*

b) This vision is pertinent for Los Angeles county and its metro outreach. The vision sees investment in new transport modes as an opportunity for innovation. Together with the adoption of supportive policies promoting TOD and containing the expansion of exburbs to be the driving force for more sustainable development.

## **3) ‘Building on the Position Secured’**

a) *It envisions a translation of the success achieved by the interventions at the city level onto the broader territorial scale of the metro area by staying the course but also accelerating the pace of development in the city while at the same time seeking to involve the suburbs in the strategy.*

b) This vision is pertinent for Chicago, where it is pursued by the ‘Chicago 2020’ plan and the intra-regional initiative of ‘Common Ground’. In the Midwest capital, sharing of interest and institutional partnerships with the suburbs are being sought in areas such as regional transport and reverse commuting, ‘greening’ initiatives adopted successfully by the city, water distribution and conservation, and the sharing of investment in high tech initiatives. The essence of this vision is the spatial and temporal extension of the achievements of this productive approach. Because of its success it is deemed to be a model that is suitable area wide and that needs to be continued in its pursuit and application. New York should embrace it as well.

## **4) ‘Advanced and Inclusive Development’**

a) *It envisions pushing forward and insuring the longitudinal and territorial sustainability of the high level of development that has been achieved by the city and its metro area, by leveraging the contribution of its more marginal neighborhoods and sub-population groups.*

b) This vision has its champion in the city of Portland, Oregon. What is praised as the ‘Portland’s edge’ is the achievement of a high level of development and, therefore, quality of life in relative and absolute terms. The vision has been to adopt a combination of ‘smart growth’ policies to prevent and contain sprawl together with initiatives to enhance and attract innovative business; furthermore, to coordinate them across the metro area. In the current climate of economic crisis, the vision now entails the pursuit of greater social cohesion and maintaining economic and environmental sustainability. Therefore, interventions are to focus on population sub-groups and on the more deprived urban and peripheral

neighborhoods, whose contribution to development is inadequate, within the reach of Portland's advanced economy

### **5) 'Catalysts for New Urban Development'**

a) *It envisions the investment of federal and state resources in a sustained two pronged approach that also aims to attract the private sector into partnerships for job creation: the development of human capital as much as the retrofitting of deprived or devastated neighborhood spaces.*

b) Post Katrina's New Orleans is the best case in point. Changing the direction of the reconstruction effort that has followed the devastation by the hurricane is difficult, but it is a compelling necessity. This historic Gulf capital has lost massive number of people and the public sector driven reconstruction has proceeded with a focus on the retrofitting of the central areas and no clear choice in terms of large scale HR investments. Private investment is lagging behind. Other cases:

### **6) 'Advanced Industrial Development'**

a) *It envisions to attract manufacturing in the form of high quality productions that are competitive and are supported by financial and advanced services.*

b) Pittsburgh is a case in point. This vision builds on the heritage of an important industrial past and a still viable industrial base, which has suffered because of outsourcing and has lost much ground. The essence of this vision is to prevent and reverse the industrial downturn, by creating the conditions for attracting domestic and foreign investments into the modernized productions and enhance the skills of the workforce in the supportive advanced service sectors. The role of R&D institutions is also key. Example of advanced industrial oriented development in a new urban area: Huntsville (AL) where it is building on coattails of the defense industry.

### **7) 'Leveraging Region-Specific Assets'**

a) *It envisions to create prosperity on the strength of significant but unrecognized or underutilized assets that characterize the territory.*

b) San Antonio (TX) is a case of the recognition that the city and its region have very valuable assets that up to now have not been properly acknowledged in their development potential and, thus, have not been fully leveraged. While San Antonio has focused on the commercial redevelopment of its downtown river area, the potential of the area's environmental and cultural assets has marginally recognized. As a consequence, such assets have been underutilized and have not been the source of new development initiatives.

## 8) 'Governance and Cross-Border Links'

a) *It envisions to facilitate increases in competitiveness and job creation by operating at a larger scale to enhance coordinated governance for more effective decision making through the promotion of cross-border cooperation.*

b) Seattle, the capital of the North-West, shares the enclosing Puget Sound maritime border with the urban areas of British Columbia. The development potential that the common international border offers is more and more recognized on both sides of it. Significant gains are to be achieved if decision making and implementation can enlarge their scale of operation to this larger dimension.

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