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When we think about the world’s great megacities, certain names immediately come to mind, along with particular characteristics representing those cities’ specific qualities. Paris is known for its architectural and cultural heritage, New York for its creative energy and dynamism, London for its financial activities, and Bangalore for its entrepreneurship and capacities for innovation. All these relatively successful urban giants emerged after histories of varying lengths, often full of ups and downs; they are cities that have known how to reinvent themselves when necessary, adapting to such major historical developments as the industrial revolution or the shift to a service economy and society. Each has discovered its own original path, though certain shared features account for their success.

Edward Glaeser’s work is a fascinating inquiry into how cities evolve, and it clearly identifies the factors that lead to their success or failure. First and foremost among them are a number of economic mechanisms; the author cites several examples to demonstrate his claims. One of his great strengths is to enable all readers to grasp principles that might seem complex and abstract if cast in more theoretical language.
Several characteristics must be in place if urban activity is to develop. First, a city has to have a pool of educated workers because they alone will be able to create businesses or work for innovative corporations – in fast-growing service sectors, for example. The presence of a trained, qualified workforce is one of the main reasons why Silicon Valley and Bangalore were able to expand. Conversely, a city like Detroit found itself with a low-skilled workforce due to its near-exclusive activity of automobile mass production throughout the industrial period and was therefore unable to bounce back after the transition to a service society. Furthermore, worker proximity and interaction foster innovation. It is the population density of large cities that leads to encounters in cafés and restaurants in which ideas are exchanged that may lead to urban growth. This holds for such concentrated business centres as Wall Street and La Défense.

A city’s success is attributable not only to its ability to train workers but also to attract and hold onto that educated labour force. Here we can cite the importance of high-paying jobs, affordable housing and consumer amenities. Housing prices are determined by market mechanisms so that supply will be equal to demand. In many cities, supply is limited by zoning restrictions. Chicago’s strategy in response to this has been to abolish zoning regulations so that developers are free to build skyscrapers near the city centre, thereby ensuring affordable rents. In fact, cities often have to choose between granting full freedoms to real estate developers and preserving their architectural and cultural heritage. For Glaeser, Paris is an extreme example here: the centre is attractive because of its rich urban design past, particularly the avenues built by Baron Haussmann, but unaffordable due to the limited stock of available housing and strict zoning regulations.

Certain cities owe some of their success to international migration. Dubai and Singapore were able to develop thanks to foreign company headquartering and skilled migrant labour. These cities are attractive because their living standards are high and because they are politically and economically open, ensuring the free movement of goods. Success may also be linked to the diversity that comes with having a considerable proportion of immigrants. The arrival of Indian immigrants in London has increased the variety of quality restaurants, making the city more attractive.

Attractive cities often encompass poor neighbourhoods with precarious housing facilities. Such neighbourhoods are not generally the result of uneven growth but rather the arrival of underprivileged migrant populations who settle on city outskirts. A striking example is the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Many of their inhabitants are farmers who decided to leave the extremely poor rural zones of northeast Brazil to try their luck in the megacity. In fact, poverty rates are lower

(7) A consumer amenity is a feature of the environment that impacts on individual or household wellbeing. Major amenity categories include green spaces (parks, wooded areas, public gardens), cultural amenities (museums, monuments, movie houses, theatres), transport amenities (transport networks, bus or tram stops and train stations) and education facilities (high-quality schools).
in the favelas than in the rural areas that many favela inhabitants come from.

Urban structure has a role to play in the planet’s future because transportation impacts on the carbon footprint. The more sprawling a city is, the longer the private car trips it requires residents to take and the higher the carbon emissions it is responsible for. Carbon emissions rose sharply in the United States in the 1950s when the automobile became a common possession and urban populations moved to what became the suburbs. To limit urban pollution, Glaeser suggests facilitating population density by loosening zoning restrictions. Moreover, the development of public transport and urban toll roads such as those now in operation in Singapore may dissuade people from taking their cars. Though this may seem paradoxical, it may be more ecological or environment-friendly to live in the midst of skyscrapers than green spaces. In fact, the direction that urban development takes in the near future in such developing countries as China and India will have a tremendous impact on global greenhouse gas emissions.

*Des villes et des hommes* gives readers a clearer sense of what is involved in economic analysis of major metropolitan areas while enabling us to get beyond our preconceived notions about urban spaces. It offers nearly all the historical information needed to understand the development and economic operation of one’s own city. The information and analytic content of the work also enables the reader to imagine how that city may evolve in the future in response to different types of public policy. This is a captivating work perfectly suited to the general reader. With its entertaining histories and anecdotes, it can be read as a novel that has much to teach us.

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