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How Urban Geography Shapes Our Lives

Lewis Mumford describes a city as “a theater of social action.” This best captures the reality that a city is not only the collection of physical entities and structures that define its landscape and spatial location, but also a social-cultural hub of economics, politics, and aesthetics where people’s “more purposive activities are focused, and worked out, through conflicting and cooperating personalities, events, groups, into more significant culminations.”

A functional definition therefore may be that a city is the highest-level category for a series of nested and interconnected associations and organizations. For example, at the primary level, we may think of individual families and familial associations. A group of families makes a neighborhood. A neighborhood intermixed with businesses and economic organizations could be a town, and so on.

Distinguishing a city from other collective physical and social landscapes or delineating the boundaries between one city and the next is much harder. Mumford argues that size alone is not sufficient measure but should always be considered in the context of the social relationships. This is why large universities, military bases, prisons, etc. are not considered cities in their own right. Connecting that to the other article, it suggests that conceptualizing urban centers as separate or distinct from the “regional hinterlands” may be flawed. Cities and exurbs are inherently interconnected and depend on each other for physical resources, social connections, and economic opportunities. The data showed that urban job growth outpaced exurban growth significantly in all regions from 2000-2016, but GDP per capita growth was greatest outside city boundaries.