

## Assignment 2

### *Corpus Urbanis Revisited*

*City as Human Body: A Phenomenological Reappraisal of Urban Geography and Systems*

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#### **Introduction**

The city is not a static monolith, but rather a living, growing organism that constitutes a series of complex social, institutional, and economic systems. This makes the assignment of a metaphor considerably challenging, because there are few single entities that have the native complexity of a city. However, there is one that comes close to capturing not only the diversity of the urban form, but also the intricately woven series of relationships and interactions that occur therein: the human body.

#### **Intellectual Precedent**

The body metaphor is indebted to the work of Janine Benyus, whose theory of Biomimicry is at the heart of the theoretical advance proposed here. According to Ms. Benyus, natural organisms and systems have already solved many problems faced by cities, in the course of solving their own. The challenge, she posits, is to learn *from* the natural world, not merely *about* it. The notion of the body metaphor recognizes constituent natural elements as part of a larger ecosystem, and applies this logic to challenges faced by humans. The natural world is not a series of discrete, independent actors, but rather an integrated system of mutually-reliant, symbiotic agents of evolution and resource optimization. The city is no different.

#### **Novelty of the Concept**

While this metaphor is inspired by Benyus' work, it is not simply an analogy between the physical aspects of nature and the urban built environment. In her lecture, Benyus drew parallels between the Tokyo subway network and slime mold to illustrate urban sprawl, between memory chips and flowers to illustrate how computers may recreate themselves, between termite mounds and modern skyscrapers to illustrate spatial and energy efficiency on an individual building level. She used many discrete examples, most seeming to focus on the physical.

The theoretical break in the metaphor proposed here is twofold: 1) natural phenomena are used to explain more than physical structures, they are used to explain social and institutional dynamics; 2) a single element of nature (the body) has been used not to describe a single element within the city, such as a subway network, computer chip, or building; rather, it is used to comprehensively explain the "whole," all systems and environments of a city. The theoretical bedrock of the body metaphor is its

complexity, and this is why it can be proposed to explain something as multifaceted – both physically and socially – as a city. Although parts of the body have been used to describe parts of the city (lungs, et al.), this theoretical breakthrough emphasizes a catholic view of both, as interactive systems.

### **Application of the Concept**

While this paper has emphasized the “whole” of the body and city, there is room in this metaphor to explore comparisons of individual elements, and that is part of the theory’s versatility. Indeed, understanding how individual elements compare between the body and city strengthens the concept of their overall comparison as interactive agents. Among the opportunities to apply the metaphor on an individual scale are many obvious parallels. There is the heart, both a literal and figurative notion, serving as the cultural/historical center of a city, and from which the lifeblood is pumped. The heart of the city may also be seen as the hub of economic vitality, such as the Financial District in New York. It may also be seen as the “soul” of a city, an iconic element that embodies a unique cultural identity such as the French Quarter in New Orleans or the Hawker Markets in Singapore.

The organs of a body play a less glamorous but still necessary role in sustaining life. The lungs, liver and stomach all have as integral a part in biological function as industrial, governmental and commercial facilities do in a city, even though the latter may be the more mundane, unsung places. “Blighted” cities may have poorly functioning “organs” (such as corroded liver), manifesting themselves in disinvested inner-ring suburbs and abandoned industrial facilities.

The transport infrastructure is the bloodstream of *Corpus Urbanis*. As an indispensable conveyance of nutrients, the bloodstream runs incessantly, day and night, as do the subways and taxis of Tokyo.

The extremities of the body play important roles. The hands are valuable in their dexterous utility, always extending outward and interfacing with the “frontier.” These may be seen as the wealthy suburbs: an industrious albeit commoditized landscape (most fingers look like each other) that pushes ever outward. As a system, the feet play an important role but individual toes are of little note. The same may be said of industrial or middle class suburbs, which as a monolithic whole provide a (theoretically) stable labor force (“flatland” neighborhoods of the East Bay).

The reproductive area may also shed light on the urban form. As the regenerative elements of the body (and the city), reproductive facilities are important to both life maintenance and pleasure. Up-and-coming bohemian enclaves are the reproductive parts of a city. Within these places radical ideas are generated and thoughts expressed in an iconoclastic way. Greenwich Village New York, Castro or Mission San Francisco, and Charlottenberg Berlin are creatively regenerative areas, unpredictable and often irreverent, but worth exploration and full of innovative potential and intellectual resources.

Finally, the head of the body provides insight into the city. There may be many answers to what constitutes the “head” of a city: government facilities, economic centers, perhaps even a university. However, in keeping with the promise of this model to chart unexplored theoretical territory, the head may be used to describe the non-physical components of the city (as the head of the body is often considered a representation of one’s intelligence). As such, the “head” of the city is its human capital, the people, without whom the physical structure of the city (or body) would be limp and lifeless. Bodies, like cities, depend on coordination in their system-oriented nature.

The model’s novelty, however, relies not on the clear connections between certain body parts and individual city elements listed above, but rather its ability to scale up and recognize the connection between a whole bodily ecosystem and the functioning, multifaceted city. Understanding the micro is important to understand the macro, and in this metaphor the latter flows from the former. This is the innovative step of this metaphor.

### **Limitations and Prospects**

If there were a perfect metaphor for the city, everyone would already know and use it. Finding intellectual “frontiers” requires uncovering latent comparisons, links and applications. The body metaphor moves towards this. While it is rooted in an intellectual precedent supplied by Biomimicry, it asserts its novelty in how it considers the complicated interdependencies of a complete system, rather than discrete comparisons among constituent elements (each of which are complicated in their own right, but work together as well). As stated, this model also provides a sociological element (human head as a city’s intellectual capital) that may not be the emphasis of Biomimicry. However, the limitation of this model is its lack of applicability to problem solving. Even though the explanatory power of this metaphor may be strong, how can it be used to make decisions about the city? How does it help a councilperson or mayor to know that the suburbs are like human arms? There is a strong “so what?” element. A surgeon’s operation to correct a bodily problem may not help leaders understand how to kill the “cancer” of urban decay. For instance, there may exist the notion of “rooting out” a problem at its cause, but the body metaphor is not needed in order to realize this solution.

However, the metaphor may serve as an impetus for further discussion about how to understand the way cities evolve, and out of this discussion may come meaningful solutions. Benyus maintains that organisms figure out how to do what they need to do, while taking care of the place that will take care of their offspring. This is the biggest design challenge. The city must function as a body that nourishes itself and its residents sustainably, but appreciates its role in the larger global system. Policy solutions may benefit from recognizing this dynamic, and the body metaphor situates urban problems in a familiar, relatable context.