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Richard Meier, Communications Theory of Urban Growth, 1961. *CSISS Classics*

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Richard Meier: Communications Theory of Urban Growth, 1961
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Background During the mid- to late 1990s, a series of papers and books were published prophesying the coming dissolution of the traditional city, which was supposed to be replaced by a more spatially uniform distribution of human settlement organized around the economy and convenience of cyberspace. Instead of breaking up, urban areas have undergone a renaissance with gentrification of previously decaying areas and related rises in property values and traffic congestion.

Richard Meier's pioneering 1961 book, *A Communications Theory of Urban Growth*, while not a theoretically definitive work, was the first important work recognizing the importance of communications functions and networks in the spatial development and sustenance of urban areas.

Innovation Meier's argument began with a series of questions. Why are there differentials in density, labor production, and land value that distinguish metropolitan areas from rural ones within the same society? What agglomerative force maintains these differentials against diffusion or conflict?

Meier contended that communications, and its relationship with knowledge and controls, "seemed to be highly correlated with the growth of cities." He was not suggesting that communications were more important than economic factors, but that they were at the root of the process which made economic growth possible. For example, when innovations were conceived by a given person or group, usually the neighbors were the first to adopt such new ideas and procedures. As this process repeated itself, such communications foci would become the setting for intensive economic and cultural growth.

Such a "utility of agglomeration" became more pronounced as villages grew to cities, and information accumulated in ever increasing amounts. Meier contended that the increasing need for information and knowledge, and the increasing use of symbols to convey them, resulted in an expansion of public life.

Public activities, as opposed to private activities, often involved interaction between strangers. Such interactions entailed transactions, which Meier posited was the basic unit of a bond between strangers, and the source of cohesion within urban society.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, when this book was originally written, western societies were undergoing a rapid process of urban decentralization, sparked in part by the growth of communications technologies like the telephone and even the television, and partly due to the increasing use of automobiles to move people between suburbs and central cities.

"Why must almost all major policy makers congregate with their assistants and ancillary help at the same time?" pondered Meier. Couldn't telecommunications resolve the need to commute to the city? Meier's response was strikingly simple. "The need for direct face-to-face contact," he maintained, "offers perhaps the best explanation for the strong attraction retained by the urban center."

For all of the appeal of telecommunications, Meier suggests that even the telephone is most effective when people are gathered together at the same time and in nearby locations:

Thus we may attribute the daily migration to the center of the city, with everybody who is anybody on hand at the same time to answer the telephone or engage in a discussion, as an attempt on the part of the superorganizations and the enduring institutions to maximize the transaction rate.

Meier believed that for urban areas to function well as centers of face-to-face or telephone communication, the communications overload, or stress, must be kept under control so that mere satisficing or even breakdown occurs. This led to a somewhat novel conclusion. He observed that as automobile growth increased, taxes were devised not only to profit from it, but to limit its tendency toward excess use and impact. Meier felt that some sort of tax regime should also be set up for communications, to prevent overload and cause people to withdraw from the public realm that encourages civic, cultural and economic growth.

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Links

[Cityspace, Cyberspace, and The Spatiology of Information](#)