

CITYSPACE by Christopher Choa

urban time

the good life is closer to home than you think



ImagineChina

A few months ago, while in New York for a business meeting, I met with an old friend who runs a well-known real estate brokerage firm. We had a few drinks and soon entered that self-satisfied state where grown men congratulate each other for being damn good fellows. Indeed, we toasted each other as modern, sophisticated men of the world. A few drinks later, we entered the next phase, that of confession. My friend admitted that despite his wide ranging travels, despite his many contacts all around the world, the majority of his business – 80 per cent – came from face-to-face deals concluded within a short walk of his downtown office.

In other words, the bulk of his revenue was generated very close to home, within a radius of a few city blocks from where we were enjoying our self-satisfied, mostly liquid lunch. Which got me thinking about how successful cities work, and two simple measures of human experience. Five hundred years ago, my friend might have led a parallel existence in a prominent, pre-industrial village. On occasion, he might ride in the back of an oxcart, say for an hour or so, to shop (or seek a mate) in a nearby town. But for the most part, his social and economic life would be centered within a short walk of his home.

In modern times, even with the advent of digital communications, we still prefer personal contact, even though the distances we travel have expanded exponentially. Many people travel around the world at least once a year, and many more must commute 40 or 50 kilometers every day just to get to work.

But, in reality, the amount of time that we spend traveling, at least on a regular basis, is about the same as it was in pre-industrial society: an hour or so (less, if possible). In an hour, we can travel by plane from New York to Boston (320 kilometers); by car from Shanghai to Suzhou (80 kilometers); or from Pudong to Puxi, if the Yan'an tunnel is really backed up. The same rule applies to

time spent on casual errands or visiting friends. Our pre-industrial counterparts were probably no more than ten minutes away from this sort of engagement, the equivalent of about 1,000 meters on foot, or about the distance between two modern day metro stops. This physical distance, and the time it takes us to traverse it, remains virtually unchanged. Human settlements are the physical manifestations of very simple, archetypal travel times. Really good cities are social interaction machines, attractive because they allow a great number of people to physically meet each other in the most efficient way. Really bad cities fail socially and economically, not because they don't have pretty high-rises or car factories, but because they don't allow us to see who we need to see in a very convenient amount of time. And it's been like that for a very long while. Eighth-century Chang'an, the imperial predecessor to modern day Xi'an, was easily the largest city in the world. More than a million people lived within the giant walled city covering around 85 square kilometers with an average density of around 120 inhabitants per hectare – that's considerably denser than central Berlin today.

The city was broken up into large, fortified neighborhood blocks of about 10,000 residents, small cities in themselves which housed families that were related by clan and kinship. If you lived in Chang'an, a ten-minute walk from one of the gates of your clan neighborhood got you to the gate of up to eight other clans, which was good for business and for finding a suitable bride. It would take you (on your oxcart) about an hour to get to one of the two major market areas within the city walls. So next time you are feeling really chuffed about how far we've all come, don't be fooled by all the shiny high-rises, the Maglev, or your new email account. An hour is still an hour. And if ten minutes can't easily get you to most of the things that matter in your daily life, it's time to move. ■

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