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# Container and Magnet: A New Theory on the Concrete Function of Contemporary Cities

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## To cite this article:

Zhang Hailun, Tan Shu. Container and Magnet: A New Theory on the Concrete Function of Contemporary Cities. *Urban and Regional Planning*. Vol. 7, No. 3, 2022, pp. 68-73. doi: 10.11648/j.urp.20220703.11

**Received:** May 30, 2022; **Accepted:** June 22, 2022; **Published:** July 18, 2022

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**Abstract:** Nowadays, cities have dominated human social life, whether it's Eastern society or Western society. This is why this issue is important. It is because urban life is not only related to the present of mankind, but also to the future of mankind. Recognizing the importance and diversity of urban functions can better guide human production and life. However, studies of the function of cities do not do a good job of explaining why this is the case. This article attempts to answer this question. This article adopts a historical perspective and comparative method, starts from the theory of traditional functionalism, and expounds the general functions of cities in the origin period, the functions of medieval European cities and ancient Chinese cities, the functions of cities after the Industrial Revolution, and the new functions of contemporary cities. On the basis of the traditional functionalism theory, urban typology and urban ecology explanations, two explanatory functions of the city are proposed - container and magnet. Statically, the city is a container of population, technology and institutions, enabling inclusion and integration; dynamically, the city is a magnet that continuously absorbs foreign populations. In a word, the function of the city is a complex of container and magnet.

**Keywords:** City, Function of City, Container, Magnet

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## 1. Introduction

Today's city brings everything together, buildings, streets, squares, communities, population, men and women, families, various occupational groups, managers and managed; formal, substantial; morphological, architectural ecological, demographic, sociological, political, semiotic, phenomenological, aesthetic, economic; capital, technology, labor, land, signs and symbols, etc. The agglomeration of these things eventually led to human beings entering the "urban society".

In the long history of human beings, cities and villages have existed side by side. In the end, cities overcame villages and became the center of human habitation, life, production, reproduction, and creation. Urbanization, as the process of population moving from the countryside to the city, has existed since the Mesopotamian plains 7,000 years ago, and has been developing in twists and turns. After the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century,

mankind began a process of massive urbanization, and eventually, by now, most of the world's population lives in cities. China, as an ancient agricultural country, in 2013, the proportion of the population living in cities accounted for more than half of the total population, which means that this ancient country with rural society as its main social structure has also entered an urban society. Although different countries have different development stages and degrees of development, one of the common features is that cities are dominant in society, and urban life is the mainstream of social life. Such a reality or trend is inevitable. [1] Why does this trend or result occur? The theory of functionalism gives us a good perspective. What is the function of the city? What are the functions of cities in different historical periods? What are the functions of modern cities? These questions are the core questions answered and explained in this paper.

## 2. A Literature Review on the Functions and Nature of Cities

The city exists as a functional entity in relation to tribes and villages. Traditional sociologists have always discussed the city as a functional entity. The village is regarded as a primitive natural existence, because rural society is easy to achieve a closed social system, achieve self-sufficiency economically, and achieve self-management politically, and can achieve self-satisfaction functionally when there is little or no contact with the outside world. On the other hand, cities are the opposite. The emergence and development of cities require contact with the outside world, management, organization, communicate or exchange of material resources, and personnel. The city has the soil on which its survival depends. The pre-modern cities are more dependency on the environment. As a functional existence of construction, the city has existed from the beginning corresponding to religion, political power or military defense. At this point, there is no difference in the origins of cities between the East and the West. The origin of the city of Rome is military defense, the origin of Jerusalem is due to religious worship, and the meaning of the city in Slavic is also a military fortress. The origin of Chinese cities is also recorded in "Wuyue Spring and Autumn", which states that "the city is built to protect the ruler". It can be seen that the protection of religious or secular kingship has become a common factor in the origin of the city, and the protection of certain sacred things has become the main function of the city.

With the development of human history, the development of cities, especially the emergence of sociology, people have conducted more in-depth investigation and research on the function and nature of cities, and their understanding of cities has been further deepened. Max Webber classifies cities by the specific functions: commercial cities, military fortress cities, industrial cities, charisma cities, consumer cities and other types. According to a specific function, a certain type of city can be refined, for example, the productive city can be divided into traditional handicraft city, modern industrial city, high-tech city and other types. The emergence and evolution of these cities correspond to different historical periods and different practical needs, and these are only the distinctions of cities in terms of types. It is necessary to examine their inherent general factors in order to further explain their nature. Weber believes that a city must meet the following conditions: 1) A city is a densely populated settlement. Not only the density of people, but also the density of buildings. 2) From an economic point of view, cities are those whose inhabitants depend on industry and commerce for their livelihoods. Among them, industry must be diverse, and the diversity of industry depends on the appearance of the court or the appearance of the market. 3) From a political-administrative point of view, a city is a special fortress or garrison. The fortress and the market merge into one in the city. 4) Western cities have developed the characteristics of "urban community", while Eastern cities do not; citizens in Western cities have "citizenship", while urban residents in

other places do not have this identity. 5) He believes that the city's main consumers ("sitting eaters") have a decisive influence on the city's market/needs. [14] Weber wanted to outline the general character of the city in the way of its unique "ideal type", also pointing out the main differences between Eastern and Western cities. Of course, Weber's urban typology is a general description of pre-industrial urban character, while post-industrial urban character has additional character traits. The main manifestation of the urban character after industrialization is the competition for urban space. This competition is not based on the protection of sacred things, but on the basis of the land price market. People's use of a certain land depends on the ease of transportation, the specialization of the area, and the ability to pay rent. These views are embodied in the classic literature on urban studies of the Chicago School. The development of the city is similar to the ecological process of "aggregation" and "dispersion", "invasion" and "succession". Burgess believes that the general trend of community development is from simple to complex, from comprehensive to specialized. The basic plane distribution structure of the community is determined by the traffic route. With the direction of traffic, not only roads and houses will increase, but also differentiation and isolation will occur inside. The residential areas are far away from the city center, and the business districts are concentrated around the places with the highest land prices. Land price is a lever to adjust the type of land. [8] McKenzie believes that: From an ecological point of view, communities can be divided into four types: 1) Basic service communities, such as agricultural villages, mining, forestry, fishing communities, etc., are the first link in the process of basic subsistence distribution; 2) Communities that perform secondary functions in the process of subsistence distribution. Commercial communities are of this type. Its scale ranges from market towns to giant port cities, and it is the central link in the realization of redistribution; 3) Industrial towns are manufacturing centre. 4) Communities lacking a clear economic foundation are economically dependent on other communities for survival. Political and educational centers are examples. [8] The Chicago School's study of urban development and urban structure is entirely based on the determination of economic production and price in the period of industrial society. The influence of traditional, sacred, cultural or administrative factors on urban development is ignored. The analysis of city types also simply reduces to economic/price determinism. It ignores the diversity of urban types and the complexity of urban functions.

With the decline of structural functionalism, scholars seem less enthusiastic about exploring the function of cities. Or they take the function of the city for granted. In addition, some scholars have tried to synthesize the elements to construct a general theory of urban prosperity. Joel Kotkin, for example, believes: "Three factors determine the overall health of a city, namely the sanctity of the site, the ability to provide security and planning, and the incentives for business. - These three aspects correspond to religion, politics, economic, respectively. And the three aspects—where these

factors coexist, the city thrives, and, conversely, where these factors decline, the city declines and is finally abandoned by history.” [13] Joel Kotkin’s *Elements of Urban Prosperity* That is, the city’s mixed function theory. It’s just that the functionalist narrative is no longer used.

The classical urban origin theory, Weber’s urban typology analysis, and the Chicago School’s urban ecology theory all emphasize the important position of a certain function of the city in the origin and development of the city. They are interpretations of cities from the past in human history. Similar explanations can also be found in the more systematic and complete theories of structural functionalism developed in the future. Traditional functionalism and structural functionalism lack explanatory power for the ever-growing and expanding urban life, for the ever-spreading urban culture, and for the functional complex city of today’s society. Therefore, we have to explore more explanatory theories from a new theoretical perspective.

### 3. The New Functions of Contemporary Cities

#### 3.1. *The First Figurative Function of Contemporary Cities - The Container Theory*

The "container theory" was proposed by Lewis Mumford. He believes: "A city is nothing more than a giant container that holds various containers. A city is a collection of buildings made of stone, a material that can exist forever. Palaces, churches, libraries, monasteries, streets, warehouses, temples, the city wall, especially the city wall, encloses the city and forms a fortress, which ensures its security against foreign invasions, and an important factor in giving the citizens a sense of security in the city. Only then can civilization accumulate in the city and the population can multiply, only can more complex social relations and power relations emerge, the increase of social division of labor, the emergence of various occupational groups, the emergence of more complex systems of exploitation and control, the emergence of more complex literature, art, philosophy, law, and ultimately science." [11] But his analysis ends here, and it offers useful insights into our interpretation of cities.

Containers - have the characteristics of containment, collection, fusion, proliferation, growth, etc. As a city with container function, its connotation is reflected in the following aspects: First, the city is the container of the population. It includes three dimensions: population size, population density, and population heterogeneity. A certain size of population and population density are necessary conditions for a city. The heterogeneity of the population includes three aspects, the first aspect is class differentiation, the second aspect is the social division of labor [6], and the third aspect is the anonymity, ephemerality and utility of interpersonal communication. [3] The particularity of a city includes the above three aspects. Class differentiation and social division of labor existed before cities, and cities amplify this trend. In addition to this, urban containers can

accommodate populations of different ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds. After the Industrial Revolution, with the large-scale expansion of urbanization, the differentiation of people’s status, social division of labor, occupational differentiation and the anonymity of residents all increased. But in cities after the Industrial Revolution, class mobility has also increased, which is the result of the modern bourgeois revolution. The societies of ancient cities were all hierarchical, with fixed identities. After the industrial revolution, the social mobility of cities has increased, and people have the opportunity to achieve their own class changes through their own efforts. Population density in urban centers continues to increase, and various types of urban land are competing. The ever-increasing urban population and land use types continue to increase the capacity of the city’s container. In the process of concentration, there is a certain degree of dispersion. Different races, nationalities, and classes also cause certain distinctions due to differences in income, culture, religious beliefs, and living habits. [15]

Second, cities are containers of technology. Technology achieves its greatest concentration, application and innovation in cities. The first city was the fortress, which reflected the application of military defense technology. The embryonic form of the city existed at the beginning of its formation. It reflects the synthesis and application of the technology of the rural community of the previous era. The churches, temples, and palaces in the city that rise above the skyline are all the integration of architectural technology. The use of streets and horse-drawn carriages, water supply and drainage systems, fire prevention measures, etc., were first used by cities. With the fall of the Roman Empire, the period between the 5th and 16th centuries saw Europe as a "dark age" of barbarism, ignorance and superstition. But this period was a period of European urban decline, followed by slow accumulation and development. Domestic dwellings, heating, drinking water supply and public bathrooms in medieval cities were all improved during that period. But the sanitation at that time was really worrying, dirty, and plagues and diseases were prone to epidemics, all of which threatened the development of the city. When the western countries were in the "dark age", the cities in the east were flourishing. After experiencing the split of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, China entered the heyday of the Sui-Tang-Song. Chang’an, the capital of the Tang Dynasty, had a population of more than 1 million and was the largest city in the world at that time. In the late Tang Dynasty, business in the city broke through the time limit, although there was still a system of segregating residential and commercial areas. By the time of the Song Dynasty, this system had also disintegrated. Kaifeng in the Northern Song Dynasty and Lin’an in the Southern Song Dynasty were both metropolises with a population of more than 1 million. [9] Therefore, the prosperity of a city can also be used as a mirror, which represents the prosperity of a country, a nation, and a culture. After the Renaissance, Europe began a new round of urban revival. With the establishment of the world market and the

development of the Industrial Revolution, the bourgeoisie took a dominant position in the city. The era powered by steam engines promoted the arrival of the mechanical age, and in the process, the continuously generated science and technology were applied on a large scale, and the city finally achieved victory. During this period, the eastern cities did not decline, but they were still models of traditional cities. However, the rapid development of Europe made the traditional eastern cities fail in development and competition.

Third, the city is the container of the system. In addition to the container of population and technology, it also has systems, organizations, institutions that maintain social order. These systems, organizations, and institutions will not only maintain the existing order, but also accommodate and reduce conflict. Social conflict is particularly acute in cities. In early cities, the city walls served as fortresses, providing security for the citizens against plunder from nomads, surrounding farmers, or other peoples. But in the late Middle Ages, the use of gunpowder disrupted the city's function as a fortress. At that time and before, there were class divisions among urban residents, but large-scale internal conflicts were rare. Parliaments, courts, religious institutions, and municipal institutions are able to coordinate conflicts between people very well. After the Industrial Revolution, the city was increasingly divided into two classes, the bourgeoisie and the working class, so that large-scale class conflicts within a city were possible. However, with the development of productive forces, the establishment of trade unions, labor protection and labor security. The emergence of social security and other factors also shows a trend of decline of labor movement. Today's urban life has become a post-industrial society dominated by the white-collar class and with the service industry as the main mode of production. Large-scale class conflicts have also lost their soil. Cities, however, did not eliminate conflicts, which began to manifest themselves in other forms. In cities, conflicts between classes are not only reflected in traditional power and identity, income and wealth, etc., but also in positions in organizations, managers and workers, and the possession and use of new valuable resources, such as Investment opportunities and channels, housing, consumer goods, etc. The differentiation of the new "housing class" is one type of urban class differentiation at this stage. Modern cities are less and less a process of natural development, and more and more a process of being controlled by human beings. The development of cities is more and more influenced by capital and power. In the new round of globalization and urban development, the urban growth model obviously stems from economic restructuring. When the service industry replaces the manufacturing industry, the urban growth model has undergone great changes. Therefore, in the process of urban development, how to improve to attract and develop service industries in many places has become a new situation of competition between cities. The competition for new industries, high-tech industries and high-tech talents is the key to urban development in the next period. In this development process, the government began to play an increasingly important role.

The government's regional planning, tax or policy preferences, priority funding, and balanced regional development strategies will all affect the rise and fall of a new round of urban development. At this stage, cities gathered a large number of "knowledge classes" who lived on knowledge production and manufacturing. Cities have also become sources of cultural innovation and social change. Since ancient times, cities have been educational and cultural centers, with knowledgeable scholars, teachers, priests, painters, sculptors, musicians, etc., who make a living from culture and its cultural products. After the scientific revolution, the combination of science, technology and production has brought the social status and role of this class to the extreme, and the future society will also be a post-industrial society dominated by them, as Daniel Bell said: "The post-industrial society is a general terms, it includes five elements. In the economic sector, the transition from commodity production to a service economy; in occupational distribution, professional and technical classes take the first place; The source of innovation and the basis for formulating social policies; in the future direction, the control and evaluation of technology dominates; in decision-making, human beings will create new "intellectual technologies". [2]

The container theory is a static statement of the essence of the city, a descriptive and explanatory statement of the urban development, it does not explain the constantly flowing and changing urban reality. So this doctrine needs a supplement. This supplement is the "magnet theory" of urban functions.

### ***3.2. The Second Figurative Function of Contemporary Cities - The Theory of Magnets***

In explaining the process of rural-urban migration, Zenit Howard said that whatever the past or present causes of population concentration in cities can be summed up as "gravity". The city can be regarded as a magnet, and each individual can be regarded as a magnetic needle. He also summed up the characteristics of magnets in cities - high wages, employment opportunities, attractive prospects, social opportunities and attractive playgrounds. But at the same time, the countryside also has its own magnetic properties. The author's goal is not to explain that urban magnets are greater than rural magnets, but to combine the advantages of urban magnets and rural magnets, overcome the shortcomings of both, and build a "garden city". [10]

At the beginning of the city, the city obviously has two factors similar to "magnets", which continuously attract the surrounding residents to the city. One is religion and the other is market. Lewis Mumford, in discussing the origin of cities, argues that there are ancient sanctuaries, symbols of various sacred meanings and powers that draw crowds to these fixed grounds from great distances. Objectives and commemorative meeting places gradually brought together people who shared common rituals and religious beliefs on a regular or permanent basis. The earliest ceremonial gathering place of human beings is the first embryo of urban development. [4] Mumford believes that the city has a symbolic meaning from the beginning, it not only represents

the local people, but also represents the city's patron saint. Religion may have played a fundamental role in the transformation of tribal chiefs into kings. In the cities, a combination of brutal control and magical rituals contributed to the stability of the rule. Fixed landmarks and monumental meeting points gradually brought together people with common sacrificial rituals or religious beliefs, on a regular or permanent basis. [4] Religious theory can explain the origin and prosperity of cities in early Mesopotamia and Egypt, but lack explanatory power to some cities that are not based on religious theocracy.

Weber believes that the essence of the city is a "market settlement". Starting from discussing the concept and essence of cities, he divided the types of cities and made a series of comparative studies, including a vertical comparison of urban societies in the ancient and medieval times in Europe, as well as a horizontal comparison between European cities and cities in other parts of the world. The problem explained is the formation process of the rational character of European cities. Weber does not define the city directly, but uses the definition of its "ideal type" sparingly. Weber believes that the essence of a city is a market settlement, and the market is indeed a basic element for gathering population, maintaining commodity production and commodity exchange, and maintaining social division of labor. However, this lacks explanatory power in explaining the cities in the east which are based on tribute and not on market exchange. The above two types of cities are typical features of pre-industrial cities. Cities attract populations through "religious collective beliefs" and "markets". However, during this period, the magnetic force of the city was obviously limited, and it could not attract the majority of the population to the city. The population of the city did not exceed 20% in any country in the pre-industrial society.

After the Industrial Revolution, the magnet function of the city was further highlighted. Especially after the 19th century, since human beings entered the mechanical age, large-scale population agglomeration and migration from the countryside to the city. The large-scale movement of people from rural to urban areas is the so-called "population urbanization". In the early stages of urbanization, peasants entered the cities and became industrial workers, which involved the change of occupation and the change of geographical location. The early British working class entered the city and entered the factory to work, and the living conditions were not ideal. Low wages, high work intensity, job insecurity, poor living conditions, and worrying moral qualities are all described by Engels in his book. However, this did not stop peasants from entering the cities. [7] With the introduction of worker protection, urban planning, and social welfare, some countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany have entered the welfare society and cultivated the middle class. Now the urbanization rate of these countries is above 90%. Basically, the urbanization process of these countries is already at a high level of stability. At present, they are all foreign immigrants, and most of these immigrants come from backward countries

and regions such as Asia and Africa. In the early 20th century, the United States began a large-scale urbanization process. In the 1960s and 1970s, they began a process of migration mainly in the suburbs, a process that some scholars call "counter-urbanization". Due to the harsh living environment in the city center, the middle class has fled, bought real estate in the suburbs, and moved from the city center to the suburbs. [5] However, from the perspective of the later connotation development of urbanization, urbanization includes the urbanization of population, the urbanization of occupation, the urbanization of behavior, the urbanization of structure and so on. These middle-class people who migrated to the suburbs are already urbanized people, so the migration of the population from the city center to the suburbs is not "counter-urbanization", but "urbanization of the suburbs" or "structural urbanization", this statement is quite in line with the actual situation, and has more explanatory power than "counter-urbanization". In the subsequent development process, the United States has formed large-scale urban belts and urban agglomerations in the northeast, west, and south. These urban contiguous areas are another advanced form of urbanization. The United States, like Europe, is currently highly urbanized in its own country, and they continue to attract foreign immigrants from all over the world. In addition to the developed countries in Western Europe, the United States, Japan, the former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, emerging third world countries, and China after the reform and opening up, the urban development model is all industrialization-driven urbanization. Their development follows the general pattern of industrial cities and urbanization, that is, the development of industry and commerce promotes large-scale agglomeration of population. Industrial cities promote large-scale agglomeration of populations that derive from the benefits of close proximity to industrial elements, raw materials, energy, transportation, and communications.

Magnet theory could explain why rural populations continue to agglomerate to cities, and why developed countries are more attractive than developing countries. In some cities in North America, an ecological process similar to the "invasion and succession" described above is continuously taking place. This is due to the decline and uninhabitability of inner cities for various reasons, and the middle class Outer suburbs migrated, and newly arrived ethnic minorities, Asian, African and Latino ethnic groups, poor people, etc. filled their original residences. The first generation of immigrants continued to work hard and accumulate capital in order to enable themselves or their descendants to receive a good education, achieve class change, and become the middle class in the United States. These slums became the location of the "cities of settlement". [12]

The magnet function of the city will continue to play a role, and it will continue to absorb the rural population of developing countries into the cities of the country, and will continue to absorb the people of developing countries into the developed countries. It dynamically illustrates the problem of urban population change.

## 4. Conclusion and Discussion: Contemporary City Is a Complex of "Container" and "Magnet"

Contemporary cities with a single function are rare. Almost every city is a complex whole that meets the needs of people in many aspects. The larger the scale of the city, the more prominent its comprehensive functions will be. Therefore, the previous functional theories have their time and space limitations in explaining cities. Therefore, a new functional explanation theory needs to be developed to discuss it. This article borrows the metaphors of "container" and "magnet" to illustrate the concrete function of the city. It is proposed that the city is the container of population, technology and institutions. Civilizations can be absorbed and accumulated; at the same time, cities are also magnets, which continuously absorb populations from elsewhere and grow. The contemporary city is a complex of container function and magnet function.

This theory can explain why cities have been the dominant social life in human history, and eventually city life has become the mainstream of human life.

Through its container function and magnet function, the city continuously completes the transformation of nature, the transformation of society, and the transformation of human mental life.

The transformation of nature, the emergence of the city is first of all the collection, application, synthesis and innovation of various technologies. These technologies have changed the face of nature, and also changed the dependence of human beings on nature, making the artificial environment the main environment for human life. In the process of urban development, human beings transform the topography, water and climate of the natural environment to make a certain area more suitable for human habitation. In constantly updated technology, humans control the conditions of climate, natural disasters, sanitation, transportation, communication, electricity, light, heat, etc. This enables humans to better control the natural environment and maximize their own development.

With the transformation of society, the emergence of the city has become the center of regional political, economic, religious, cultural, transportation, education, etc. inventions, and it has continuously attracted foreign population to join. On the basis of constant class differentiation and social division of labor, the specialization level of human activities has been improved, so that production efficiency and social control level have been improved, and large-scale human resources can be mobilized and organized to engage in a specific job. At the same time, various social systems and policies have been developed to promote the order of social life. On the basis of the life of a large number of heterogeneous and unfamiliar populations, people have become a cog of the social machine, resolving people's social conflicts, satisfying public interests and welfare, enabling all kinds of people to live and work in peace and contentment.

The transformation of the human mental life. The city itself is the product of human civilization and the birthplace of new

ideas, new cultures, new technologies, and new sciences. The environment here is more suitable for human beings to maintain the kinetic energy of innovation, and the results of innovation can be applied on a large scale. Thus, it is a process of education and stimulating innovation for people's body, mental, imagination, etc. Therefore, the transformation of human mental life is also an important aspect of urban life.

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