

# What characterizes the urbanism of the Global North?

What commonalities are shared by the U.S., Europe and Central Asia? Mega-regions, connectivity, supra-nationality — and a need for migration.

GREG SCRUGGS MARCH 23, 2016



The Earth at night, looking over North Africa and into Europe. (Anton Balazh/Shutterstock)

EUROPEAN HABITAT PRAGUE — In development parlance, key attention is paid to the “Global South”, a geographic term with major economic and social implications. What was once the “Third World”, now more commonly the “developing world”, is also recognized for its southerly place on the globe — a more neutral description that can simultaneously account for booming “middle-income” economies and countries mired in extreme poverty.

But what about the Global North? That region, too, is strikingly diverse. It runs from the Pacific coast of North America across the continent to the Atlantic Ocean, over all of Eurasia and back to the Pacific at the eastern edge of Asia. Although home to only 17 percent of the world’s population, it produces 45 percent of global gross domestic product, stores much of the world’s fresh water and generates a sizeable amount of the planet’s oxygen from its vast forests.

With natural resources galore and room to spare, this vast region has become a magnet — from immigrants heading across the U. S.-Mexico border to refugees flooding Europe. “It’s not surprising that people want to come there and make a better life,” notes Brian Evans, a professor of urbanism at the Glasgow School of Art.

His observations come from a [122-page report](#) he prepared for the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe ahead of [Habitat III](#), this year’s U. N. conference on housing and urban development. Ahead of the conference, which takes place every 20 years, the U. N. has tasked its five economic commissions with analyzing the state of cities in their jurisdiction over the past 20 years.

Despite its name, the U. N. Economic Commission for Europe is responsible for 56 countries — the United States and Canada in North America, all of Europe including Turkey and Israel, as well as the Caucasus and Central Asia. This may seem like a geographic mishmash without much in common, and Evans readily admits, “It’s fuzzy at the edges.” But, he continues, “There is quite a coherent picture that has clarified since [Habitat II](#),” the previous [Habitat conference, which took place in Istanbul in 1996](#).

Evans observed five major trends in a region that stretches from the explosive high-tech economies of the Pacific cities in North America to the depressed industrial zones of the former Soviet Union. Some may seem obvious, but he says his goal was “to make implicit facts explicit ... The U. N. is at its best when it leads by building consensus about certain incontrovertible facts.”

### 1. [The Global North clusters in mega-regions, not mega-cities](#)

Urbanization is the order of the day in this part of the world, but that doesn’t mean people are crammed into mega-cities. Sure, 82 percent of the United States and Canada live in cities or metropolitan areas, and three-quarters of that urbanized population lives in just eight clusters of “super-cities”. But these metropolitan enclaves are spread over a large swath of cities and towns.

The classic example is Boston to Washington. This stretch was deemed a “megalopolis” by French geographer Jean Gottmann in 1954 and later the “BosWash megalopolis” by futurist George Fieraru in 1967. Yet only one city — New York — can be deemed a mega-city in that cluster of over 50 million people.

That trend is now common across the broad swathe of the Global North. In the Pacific Northwest, the cities of Vancouver, Seattle and Portland form an area referred to as Cascadia. In the south-central United States, the so-called Texas Triangle links Austin, Dallas and Houston.

The European Union, too, is part of this trend: The “Blue Banana” extends from northwest England to northern Italy, drawing in 111 million people and accounting for 70 percent of Europe’s gross domestic product.

While cities like Moscow or Istanbul exhibit more of a mega-city trend, they too are moving in the direction of super-cities. Look at the east-west and north-south metropolitan corridors anchored by Russia's capital or the burgeoning connections between Turkey's biggest city, its Balkan neighbors and the cities of the Caucasus.

"For my own city of Glasgow, its future is relatively secure, because we are within one hour of [the Blue Banana]," Evans explains. "I've been saying to our mayor in Glasgow, 'We can be in London, Paris, Amsterdam in an hour, and that matters.'"

He offers the analogy of Lowell, Massachusetts. A former industrial city near Boston, Evans says Lowell too shouldn't fret for its economic future, given its proximity to the U. S. Northeast Corridor.

## 2. From the Industrial City to the Knowledge City

The birthplace of the Industrial Revolution has moved on from polluting factories and dirty coal mining, bringing much of the rest of the Global North with it. North America and Western Europe may be leading the way with Central Asia still lagging behind in industrial economies, but the long-term arc is clear. Eastern Europe is becoming a cluster for high-tech initiatives, such as in [hyper-wired Tallinn](#), Estonia. And Evans believes the Balkan states will eventually join the European Union, further connecting them with the knowledge economy.

In turn, the world's top 200 universities can be found in the super-cities referred to earlier, with the vast majority of them in the countries served by the U. N. Economic Commission for Europe. Even in the Internet era, this kind of clustering has proved vital to economic growth.

"The death of distance is overstated," says Evans. "Yes, you can live in a remote shack on the Hudson Bay with satellite Internet and play the stock market, but Internet billionaires want to be in Silicon Valley or the Silicon Roundabout" in London. The knowledge economy thrives on connections, from transportation networks to interpersonal interaction. The latter, it turns out, also demands an experience economy — the single-origin coffee shops, craft beer bars, farm-to-table restaurants and "buy local" boutiques that have sprung up in the most coveted corners of the super-cities.

## 3. Over the river and to the coasts

In the Global North, a physical map — one showing only natural features — would largely predict a political map, one showing cities and towns. Specifically, the natural harbours of the coasts and inland lakes, as well as the veinlike extensions of river valleys, are the cradle for the region's urban growth. Cities cluster on both sides of the Atlantic and Pacific, and also crop up along North America's Great Lakes and waterways such as the Mississippi-Missouri, Rhine-Danube and Volga-Don.

Even as air travel makes access to navigable water less relevant for passenger travel, cargo ships continue to serve as the backbone for the freight that keeps these cities humming.

But that proximity also creates vulnerability to global climate change. Sea-level rise threatens port cities from Miami to Rotterdam. In recent years, flooding has wreaked havoc on riverfront cities in the U. S. Midwest and Central Europe. Superstorm Sandy in New York City and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans highlighted staggering vulnerability to natural disasters. Earthquakes threaten the metropolises of the North American Pacific coast and have devastated parts of Turkey.

All of these risks add up to the importance of urban resilience. “If your top 100 universities are critical, they’re not going to do you much good underwater,” Evans notes.

#### 4. National borders matter less and less

From the North American Free Trade Agreement to the common market of the European Union to the Eurasian Economic Union, international trade has never been more seamless in the Global North. “There is a tendency to be supra-national and disassociate city economies from the national economy,” Evans says.

Boston’s economic relationship with Montréal, for example, is much stronger than its relationship with Minneapolis. The same goes for densely packed Europe, where France’s northerly metropolitan area Lille spills into neighbouring Belgium more so than into Marseille.

“Mayors just want to trade,” Evans concludes, suggesting that creating an enabling environment for urban economic activity could be the best legacy of Habitat III. “The decision to concentrate Habitat III on cities ... that was a shrewd move,” he says.

#### 5. The Global North needs migration

The mass movement of people from the Global South to the Global North has created significant political angst. In turn, this has led to the rise of right-wing xenophobia and anti-immigrant populism in the United States and Europe alike.

But that fear is misplaced, Evans says — and against the economic interests of the region. The European Union estimates that it will need 50 million migrants in the coming generation just to maintain its current population, as birth rates decrease. “We [the U. K.] actually need immigration to survive,” he says. “So does the U. S.”

He says that U. S. presidential candidate Donald Trump’s proposal to build a massive wall along the U. S.-Mexico border “fundamentally misunderstand[s] the nature of the U. S. economy.”

Migrants are drawn to the dynamic super-cities, which Evans estimates will eventually be home to 70 percent of the world’s population. But that’s not where they’re needed, he warns. In addition, 10 percent will live in remote cities, “where they will suffer shrinkage, sprawl and aging populations”. These cities are at risk of becoming ghost towns without a new influx.

Migration can solve this problem, Evans says. And cities can support this by training immigrants and offering them opportunities, especially in the relatively out-of-the-way urban areas that need new residents. Canada has pioneered a hybrid federal-provincial immigration policy, for example, where remote provinces have a quota for immigration visas. This initiative has been credited with bringing new life into cities such as Winnipeg, outside the dynamic clusters.

See more at: <http://citiscopes.org/habitatIII/news/2016/03/what-characterizes-urbanism-global-north#sthash.qCoBky8F.dpuf>