

# **An Evolutionary Perspective on the 'Vital' City: the Case of Glasgow**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The 'organic' nature of urban change is well enough known, and pervades urban planning literature from writers as diverse as Soria y Mata, Howard, Geddes, Le Corbusier, Mumford, Jacobs and Alexander.

However, there are many quite different interpretations of this 'organic' sense – the city as an organism, or a more general sense of a living thing or organic entity, or as an evolving entity. Moreover, these interpretations are based on different degrees of abstraction from actual biology. However theoretical, these interpretations have practical consequences, as they affect our urban interventions: including the kinds of drastic urban 'surgery' that cities were subjected to in the 1960s and 1970s; the idea that cities should stop 'growing' but should have 'offspring' (new towns); and the way planned towns or cities should be designed as 'organic wholes' with internally 'harmonious' parts.

Drawing from contemporary scientific understanding such as complexity science, emergence, and popular interpretations of evolution, as well as urban theory, this paper aims to update our understanding of urban change through an evolutionary perspective.

The paper argues that there is a fundamental difference between seeing the city as an 'organism' – that is, a composite object that develops over time – and as something evolutionary that evolves over time. This paper investigates the difference between the 'developmental' paradigm that sees urban settlements grow as if according to a maturing programme, with an optimal finite size and 'balance' between parts, and an evolutionary paradigm in which there is no long term programme, no optimal size, no endpoint knowable. It is suggested that designing the city 'as if' an organism is little different from designing it as if it were a machine. Instead, it is argued that the evolution of cities is not merely another figure of speech, but is a definite process that is no more or less real than urban 'growth', 'vitality' or 'regeneration'. Moreover, evolutionary urbanism is not merely a historical phase that was supplanted by modern planning, but is a continuous process, understanding of which can help us promote 'vital' cities today.

The paper uses examples from Glasgow to demonstrate the evolutionary nature of urban change: the original settlement, the 'New Town' extensions (Merchant City and

Blythswood); the subsequent Modernist surgery in pursuit of a 'coherent whole' and the dysfunctional consequences; and subsequent successful adaptations. Suggestions for an alternative 'evolutionist' approach to urbanism are then made.

**Key Words:** evolution, urbanism, Glasgow