

Letter from the Editor

Connection. When Agora staff selected this theme for our sixth volume, it was in anticipation of a conversation that would highlight different segments of the complex networks that constitute the urban environment. With authors free to interpret the theme at any scale and from any perspective, we looked forward to a publishing a wide variety of ideas and observations, each identifying a unique point where connections are made.

Unsurprisingly, submissions this year were incredibly diverse, and the 12 pieces that were ultimately selected represent this diversity very well. Whereas some authors chose to focus on entire networks – on transportation systems and infrastructure – others discussed cooperative relationships, the ties between theory and practice, and the interdisciplinary nature of urban studies. Separate pieces from distinct authors began to show relationships to one another. And this year, more than the past few years, the tone of many of the pieces invited another form of connection – a more personal and reflective one between the author and the reader. Whether they intended to or not, each of our contributors addressed the theme in some way. While we originally thought that it was the vagueness and openness of the word that made this possible, it seems that it's the ubiquity of the concept that has made it inevitable.

The first two articles advocate making connections as a means to an end. In "Embracing Smart Decline," Payton Heins reviews the topic of shrinking cities, and the need in such cities for a paradigm shift that would enable decision-makers and residents to openly address and mitigate the negative impacts of population decline. She offers that many cities are reluctant to make this shift, and are not adopting strategies that are appropriate for the conditions that they face. These strategies, she notes, emphasize relationships, both in the theoretical sense that ties each city to its socio-economic and geographic contexts, and in the sense of partnership, between each city and its citizens.

In her piece on public transit marketing, Melinda Morang declares that not enough has been done to connect public transit to its customer base. Following a history and discussion of marketing concepts in the United States, Melinda identifies the shortcomings in the ways that public transit agencies attract and maintain ridership. She argues that transit provides an opportunity to alleviate the negative social and environmental impacts of automobile dominance, but that we will never realize this if transit agencies cannot reach their riders.

Eric Dennis, in "Critiquing the Culture of Critiquing the Culture of Sprawl," theorizes a society divided into "cultured" and "uncultured" individuals with differing value systems and cognitive processes. He suggests that these differences may account for the disconnect between urban theories that advocate for higher densities in central cities, and the reality that people continue to settle at low densities in outlying suburbs. He also insists that theorists evaluate their own motivations for criticizing sprawl, noting that they may be more driven by subjective values than they would otherwise like to believe, and that this has negative consequences for the efficacy of the policies and practices derived from this process.

The next two articles use analysis to unearth or expose the networks that underlie the systems that support our societies. Elias Schewel and Eric Seymour's GIS analysis of food accessibility in the Detroit Tri-County area helps us to visualize the relationship between the network of neighborhoods and food destinations in the region. Their work evaluates the theory that Detroit is a "food desert," identifying variations in the food landscape that both support and complicate that theory. The usefulness of their findings in clarifying our understanding of food availability in this region demonstrates the power of technology, information, and visual communication in connecting space and context.

Elizabeth Renckens' article on decentralization in Ghana examines the complexities inherent in the process of devolving power to local government, and the ways in which these complexities affect local governance of issues like infrastructure maintenance. She argues that the ways in which decentralization is actually carried out and practiced may complicate and undermine the goals of decentralization policy. Her analysis of the various points of friction in Ghanaian governance, and the ways in which community structure either promotes or overcomes this friction, reminds us that the dense networks of action and reaction within our societies are difficult to untangle and predict.

Patrick Ethen offers a speculative vision of Manhattan as a city of no cars. This is an essay about movement, and it takes its cue from the Occupy movement of the past year. Having realized that the majority of Manhattan's population does not drive cars, he proposes that they reclaim the island's streets for non-motorized transit. The proposal includes plans for a series of parking mega-structures that bar automobiles from entering the city. While audacious, the plan highlights a legitimate disconnect between the preferences of the majority and the dominant car-oriented paradigm.

Joseph Jones takes a similar idea in a different direction. In his evaluation of New York City's 80/20 Program, Joseph discusses the concept of spatial segregation in urban housing. He frames this in contrast to spatial justice, and describes various efforts that have been undertaken in order to achieve it. Among these is the 80/20 program, a policy with good intentions which is complicated in implementation by a host of factors. Just as in the decentralization in Ghana piece, we see that policy cannot be made in a vacuum, but rather with careful consideration of the actors and contexts to which it relates.

Elizabeth Renckens' second piece identifies the various milestones that led to the construction and subsequent decline of the I-81 viaduct in Syracuse, NY. It investigates long-term connections that must be drawn over decades of planning and policy-making as a means of understanding a place's decision-making context.

In "Architecture-City: Structuring Urban Environments," Branden Clements suggests three means for uniting architecture and urbanism in the design process. This essay positions individual buildings as the most basic and enduring element of the city. Noting each building's longevity and import at the small scale, Branden insists that designers consider classic, context-driven designs that will outlast shifts in culture and technology and promote continuity for residents.

Professor Kelbaugh's editorial piece on Dubai emphasizes points of disconnection in the city's transportation infrastructure. He notes paradoxes and contradictions in the system, and describes Dubai's development trends and transportation culture. He then provides an evaluation and offers recommendations for improvement. In this piece, he brings together his experiences as both an academic and a practitioner.

Similarly, John Drain's editorial piece brings together a number of personal experiences and interests with expertise that he has gained as both a professional in real estate and a student of urban planning. He tells a story of American malls, "dead" malls in particular, using anecdotes and observations acquired over numerous visits to various malls around the country. Through this narrative we gain the ability to generalize the mall experience to some degree, learning more about the similarities between "dead" malls across the Midwest. Moreover, we can begin to see that all places have continuity, and that even declining malls have an afterlife that is tied to the contexts of place and society.

Lastly, Michelle Lam's piece on a beloved public space takes us through a brief, intimate reverie in Hong Kong. Though set in a distant location, the sentiments and experiences that she shares will be, in some way, familiar to most. Our theme weaves lightly throughout, appearing at moments of recognition, of passing, of settling in, and of memory. In any given place, it seems, connections are pervasive and deep.

At six years, *Agora* is still a young publication. From issue to issue, we strive to maintain a sense of continuity, tying to the lessons and the ideas of our predecessors while creating opportunities for growth in the future. Now at the close of another successful year, it's clear that we owe our successes to the connections and networks that extend throughout the planning community here at the University of Michigan. Not only is this the source of endlessly diverse material, but it's also home to the curious and dedicated researchers and writers who seek to articulate this material. We want to thank all those who have submitted and contributed this year and in years past, and our readers as well, for being a part of our community. Thank you so much for sharing your curiosity and dedication with us.

Katharine Pan
Editor-in-Chief