1. Introduction: the importance of the quality of urban life

Economies are usually in a state of change, with periods of secular stagnation being one exception to the rule. This evolution from an economy of one basic nature to that of another is presumably a movement to an economy that is better or more efficient, with enhanced productivity and increased availability of goods and services for the population. In the course of this evolution the economy becomes more complex, more technologically sophisticated, more dependent upon flexibility and adaptability to new circumstances. The past 150 years have been marked by the evolution from an economy of “blue collar” manufacturing in industrial concerns, or factories, with workers characterized by manual labor, often highly skilled, organized in unions, having little leisure time, and little life after the end of the working years. Workers often walked to their job, had little formal education, and anticipated that their children would follow in the steps of their parents.

In recent decades, the economy has changed to the detriment of these workers and their employment. Technology has made many of their skills no longer relevant to the contemporary mode of production, their children have gained some level of education that has opened other lines of work to them, the towns and cities in which they have spent their lives have become shadows of their former vitality, unions are declining in both membership and power, and inadequate policy response to the structural changes from increasing international trade has left them on the sidelines of the globalized economy. These deteriorating conditions had their first impact on the US African American population, and then a couple of decades later decimated the country’s White population. In each instance, as Ann Case and Angus Deaton have detailed so well, the populations have been decimated by “deaths of despair”, alcoholism, suicide, and drug use – heroin and crack cocaine with African Americans and then OxyContin with the White population a couple of decades later. (Case and Deaton, Part I) Economic progress has been decreasingly kind to workers who lack a university degree and the skill set that comes with it.

The most recent developments in the economy have seen a transition from manufacturing as the primary source of employment to the services sector, including financial services, retail, real estate, personal services, travel, hospitality, education, healthcare, and government, that is, from the Fordist to
the post-Fordist economy. (Scott, pp. 6‒11) This has been fed by the rapid development of robotics, computerization, advanced communications, and other transformations of the production of goods and services. As the coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated so dramatically, many workers no longer need a desk in an office tower, but can telecommute their work from home or almost anywhere. This is likely to have powerful and far-reaching implications for public and private transportation (including air travel), residential housing, the attractiveness of living in the city or in a suburb, the attractiveness of large cities versus smaller cities, the market for commercial space and office towers, the demand for education and other approaches to skill development, and almost every other aspect of modern living.

As is appropriate to this new stage in the development of the economy, the characteristics and preferences of the new labor force differ greatly from those of the previous generation of workers. Of fundamental importance is the fact that today’s tech workers have a variety of options that were never available to yesterday’s workers. Having a university education immediately enhances the worker’s attractiveness to employers which leads to increased mobility, flexibility, and strength in the decision-making process. The worker can choose the location, nature, and characteristics of the employment that is decided. Younger workers have specific preferences for ambience, social life, and characteristics of the job, often they have young families and demand the appropriate education, public security, quality of neighborhood, public transportation, and amenities such as recreational and cultural offerings of the city or town chosen. Therefore, the educated worker has power in the market for labor that was rarely the case for the previous generation. These sought-after characteristics can be combined into what one can refer to as “quality of life”, or QoL. In the words of Edward Glaeser: “People are increasingly choosing areas on the basis of quality of life, and the skilled people who come to attractive areas then provide the new ideas that fuel the local economy. Smart, entrepreneurial people are the ultimate source of a city’s economic power, and as those people become more prosperous, they care more about quality of life.” (Glaeser, p. 132)

In recent years increased attention has been given to the role of quality of life in various important aspects of a city’s economy. In the earlier period many cities had distinct roles to play in the economy – Pittsburgh is where steel was produced, in Detroit it was automobiles, Seattle was aircraft, New York was finance and Chicago was the transportation gateway for the Mid-west agricultural economy to world markets. Many other cities have had distinctive roles since their earliest years. In the new economy, this has changed dramatically. Some economic activity has gone abroad to areas that are closer to markets or to low cost labor and production. However, while Detroit is still struggling to find its place, Chicago, Seattle, Pittsburgh and New York, along with many
other cities, have found new roles for themselves in the new technology-based economy.

The new economy is a fluid economy with production evolving into new technologies and new products, with new cities entering the competitive scene and some cities being abandoned due to an inability to evolve quickly and suitably enough, and with firms being linked in global structures or networks. At the goods end of the process, cities are increasingly in competition with each other. Firms can be attracted to opportunities that are made available to them by other cities, firms are often merged into larger structures in which the original host city no longer has a role to play, and, of course, firms can become bankrupt. In all of these instances the city in question loses out, and either adapts to the new world or slowly deteriorates in relation to other cities. In this world of increased flux, cities must be constantly alert to challenges and opportunities, and must be proactive with regard to the evolution of their economy and its key actors.

Today’s cities and the firms in their economy must also be aggressive when it comes to the key resource in that economy – the high skilled, highly mobile, and younger labor force. The workers in this labor force can choose the city in which they want to work and live, and can, indeed, opt to work for a firm in one city and to telecommute from a home in a rural location, or in any other place, distant from that city. What these workers seek is a quality of life that suits their needs and those of their family. In this labor market the power has shifted to a considerable degree from the employer to the employee. These are the firms that now make up the key element in the economy of a city that is playing in this field. Each city has to make itself attractive to these highly mobile workers by enhancing the quality of life elements that are important to them.

This is the central point of discussion for the book that follows. In it we will examine several principal aspects of the importance of quality of life for contemporary cities.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

There are six aspects that will be elaborated on in the six chapters that follow. Each treats a distinct element in the complex that comprises “quality of life”, from the standpoint of its relevance to urban economies. The first half of the book will examine the consequences of quality of life and the second will discuss the components of quality of life. That is to say, the first half will examine what quality of life can do for or to a city’s economy, and in the second half we will discuss how a city can enhance its quality of life. This distinction between consequences and components is, of course, a bit artificial since the two sets of linkages blend into each other at points. Nonetheless, it is
still useful to structure the elements in this way as this captures the principal aspects of the relationships as, I hope, will be clear by the end of the text.

**The Consequences of Quality of Life**

Having a high or low quality of life will have important consequences for the vitality and status of any city. This should be self-evident, but it is in the specifics that we find things that are of interest to us. The first issue we will discuss is that of “happiness”, a concept that has come into prominence in urban studies in recent years. The second is the impact of quality of life on the competitiveness of the city. The third is its impact on important aspects of the economy itself.

**Chapter 2 – contemporary analysis of quality of life**

For most of the history of the study of economics, its practitioners have had little to say about quality of life, per se. From its earliest days, economists have recognized the contribution to human wellbeing of friendship, collegiality, good conversation, and other non-material aspects of social intercourse, but the problem arises when it is clear that none of this can be quantified, measured, and calculated. These elements slip through one’s fingers and one is left with material goods and exchangeable services. Hence, we have searched in vain for much of a discussion of quality of life until rather recently. During the past decade economists have become intrigued by the notion of “happiness”. Luigini Bruni gives us a very informative review of the development of the notion of “happiness” during the past two centuries. (Bruni) Indeed, we now have a Global Happiness Council that calculates annually a World Happiness Report. (Sustainable Development Solutions Network) At this point, it is sufficient to note that a questionnaire is distributed to residents in 157 countries, and the result is a ranking of countries from most to least happy. Other research entities have entered this area and have issued their own similar indices of something roughly approximating the concept of happiness.

At the level of the city, which is our primary concern, there are several approaches to study and promotion of “urban happiness”. The mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, has, earlier this year, introduced an initiative to create a “15 minute city”, based on an advisor’s notion that there are six things that make an urbanite happy and they are all centered on the notion that one should cluster the various elements in a resident’s daily life to a smaller radius than is currently the case. (O’Sullivan) This leads into a policy approach that promotes bicycles instead of automobiles, and to promotion of other policies to reduce global warming. Promotion of urban happiness quickly leads one to a much broader set of policy initiatives.
Other economists have linked quality of life with amenities, the business climate, climate and environmental aspects, and diversity and inclusion. One found that 40 percent of the growth in college graduates in a city’s labor force was attributable to increased quality of life. (Shapiro, p. 3) In a break with the work of orthodox economists, one set of analysts of the developing world found that many wealthy countries fail to achieve an acceptable level of wellbeing while this is achieved in many of the poorest countries. (McGregor, Camfield and Woodcock)

In all of these studies, one of the primary interests for this book is the set of variables the various authors have used to analyze or to measure quality of life.

Chapter 3 – quality of life and competitiveness
Competitiveness in relation to other cities has become an extremely important issue for the contemporary city and its leaders. With companies and skilled workers so mobile and willing to move from one city to another that offers whatever it is that they find desirable, no city can afford to rest on its past accomplishments and successes. The entire structure in which city, firm and worker exist today has a fluidity that has not been seen before. The study of this phenomenon, urban competitiveness, has attracted a large number of researchers since the 1990s and in their work several have included the role of quality of life in the enhancement of a city’s competitiveness, some of which is discussed by Daniel Naud and Remy Tremblay, while noting some difficulty in its definition. (Naud and Tremblay)

Peter Karl Kresl and Balwant Singh have broken the determinants of competitiveness into two categories, hard and soft. (Kresl and Singh, pp. 244–5) Whereas the former are features such as location, a major airport, research labs, capital stock, and population growth, the soft determinants include public security, health facilities, recreation, congenial neighborhoods, and public education. Clearly, the soft determinants are more easily managed than are the hard ones. Quality of life per se tends to be composed of the soft determinants.

In their study, Kresl and Singh found that, over time, the soft determinants have become more important as determinants of urban competitiveness than the harder ones. This conforms with the increased attention that is being given to quality of life in the study of urban competitiveness.

There is clearly a dynamic element to this in that the factors that make a city’s quality of life attractive to firms and workers at one time may not be suitable a few years later. The city must continually evaluate its strengths and weaknesses in this regard and must be conscious of the need to modify its amenities and attributes over time. This in itself calls for an activist and engaged city government, and for responsive agencies and governance structures.
Chapter 4 – quality of life and the economy

Having a high or low quality of life will have a powerful impact on the nature of the city’s economy. First is the structure of the economy. Having a good quality of life means that the city has choices in creating the sort of economy it seeks to have. It has options rather than being obligated to take whichever manufacturing and service sector firms choose to locate within its limits. In the latter case, it may be a firm that seeks only the lowest paid and skilled workers it can find for the low level activities it wants to develop. The city is then just a taker and is not able to be a demander in its economic development. The high quality of life city can actively market itself and can work to create an economy that is environmentally clean, actively growing over time, has a labor force that will be attracted to a lively retail, housing and amenity complex and that will seek on its own to enhance these elements to the city’s milieu. This is evocative of Richard Florida’s “Winner Take-All Urbanism”. (Florida, ch. 2)

This can also be seen in the evolution of that economy over decades as one success works to build another success. With a poor quality of life, over time the city will deteriorate in several ways as talented workers seek employment elsewhere and desirable firms also decline or relocate. Once this deterioration begins, it is virtually impossible to turn it around except with the most visionary and effective leadership. Pittsburgh was able to make a transition from steel to medical technology and robotics, Chicago transitioned from basic steel to high alloy specialty steel, and many other cities with high quality of life have made similar transitions; others, such as Youngstown, have been less successful.

The final quality of life issue we will examine is the relationship between the city and the national economy and with other levels of government. Cities develop reputations among other cities and among an array of economic actors throughout the nation. When firms look for new places to establish entities they seek locations their employees will find to be congenial. When cities partner with other cities in any sort of initiative they look for places that will be trouble free and will make a contribution to the initiative. Cities that have a reputation for having a positive quality of life are attractive places for this sort of cooperation. They participate in what Bruce Katz and Jennifer Bradley refer to as participation in a “global network of trading cities”. (Katz and Bradley, ch. 7) Troubled cities are not attractive partners to other cities. With reference to state and national governments, troubled cities tend to be drains on resources, while those cities with a high quality of life tend to seek funding for cultural, beautification, transportation and other initiatives that bring benefits to residents from other cities who are attracted to visit them.
The Components of Quality of Life

Cities vary considerably in their quality of life. We have just seen how important this can be for any city. What determines a city’s quality of life? In this section we will examine what are arguably the three most powerful factors that enhance a city’s quality of life. First is a set of demographic elements that treat the composition and the development of a city’s population. Second are a set of urban attributes, elements that help to define the city. Finally, we will examine a set of eight factors that can be described as the city’s urban amenities. These three elements will serve to differentiate a city from all others, as well as positioning that city in an array of all of the others.

Chapter 5 – demographics and quality of life

Urban demographics is a set of characteristics of a city that have become front page items in our newspapers. This is certainly true of migration, and racial mix and tension. The Trump administration has turned migration into an issue that divides the population into what has increasingly been described as tribes. But beyond this, migration has been a very positive element in a city’s labor force. On the one hand, during the pandemic our television screens have been filled with images of physicians and nurses, as well as researchers, scientists, cleaners, cooks, and medical assistants, among others, and a very significant percentage of them are recent immigrants from countries all over the world. On the other hand, the same is true of the high tech world and its entrepreneurs, researchers, and skilled workers. The Seattles, Austins, Silicon Valleys, and other centers of the US tech world are disproportionately populated with immigrants. Without them we would be a much less advanced place. Any city should seek to maximize this component of its population.

The second element is racial mix and racial tension. The “Black Lives Matter” movement is a monument to the failure of many of our cities to create a climate of tolerance and of diversity. Racial tension served to limit the economic competitiveness of the US South, a deterrent to growth that began to diminish only when the financial and technology sectors attracted a skilled labor force from more tolerant regions of the country. Richard Florida and Melanie Faasche calculate a Global Index of Tolerance every year. (Florida and Fassche) They argue that any city that wants to serve as a host to innovative, talented, and creative people and the firms that employ them simply must be a city with a culture of tolerance with regard to race, gender, sexual identification, religion, national origin, and so forth.

Much has been made recently of the relative growth rate of a city by its population size, the part of the country in which it is situated, and whether the city is an urban center or a suburb. Population growth or decline is an obvious
indicator of a healthy or a troubled city. But the issue is not as simple or as causal as it would appear to be at first glance.

Finally, is there an optimal age distribution for a city that seeks a high quality of life? Does a high proportion of seniors mean that the city’s cultural institutions will be well supported? Or are there some negative consequences, perhaps on the housing market, or the healthcare sector? One recent study demonstrated that a population of seniors had a set of several positive impacts on a city’s economy and that on balance this was a positive element in the urban population. (Kresl and Ietri, esp. p. 174)

Chapter 6 – urban attributes and quality of life

One of the most salient aspects of a high quality of life of any city is the pride its residents take in its history and the development of its most prominent aspects. Some of these accomplishments include, for example, Pittsburgh’s history with the steel industry, or St. Louis’s rather short-lived identification as the “Gateway to the West”, or Rochester’s identification with Eastman-Kodak. Residents take pride in this element of their history and it makes them feel good about their city. This pride can become a factor that supports optimism about the future of the city. It serves as a base for identification with the city and a willingness to remain there. Those who study this issue use terms such as “strategic image marketing”, and “place promotion” or “place boosterism”, to link pride in place to place branding and marketing. (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, ch. 1)

An issue that has received some attention in recent years is that of an optimal size for a city – is there one? Can small cities thrive in a niche in which they are well suited? Are there issues of coordination, transportation, governance, and social cohesion that hinder the ability of a “too large” city to compete effectively? Furthermore, can a city’s population density, or the lack of it, be a factor that will act positively or negatively on a city’s quality of life?

Another factor that can have an impact on city quality of life is that of isolation or connectedness. This is an issue that is very much “in the eyes of the beholder”. Cities of all sizes are linked to large cities, such as New York or Los Angeles. Do their residents sort themselves out in accordance with their preference for close proximity, or connectedness, or sufficient distance to manage their own lives? Is life in rural Montana one of isolation, even if one telecommutes with a firm in Seattle? This is obviously a complex issue.

The final urban attribute we will examine is that of effectiveness of government. The lack of this attribute can be extremely frustrating to one who wants the basic services of government to be reliably provided. One’s quality of life can be greatly diminished if one is routinely frustrated in provision of these services.
Chapter 7 – urban amenities and quality of life

There are eight urban amenities we will examine in relation to their impact on quality of life. They are rather straightforward and we will not have to discuss them in detail here. They are essentially the core elements that can be seen as determinants of a city’s ability to attract the highly skilled workers of the economy of today and in the future. We have noted above that these workers are highly mobile. In contrast to their predecessors they do not graduate from an educational institute and then work in the town or city in which they grew up. Rather, they move to a city that offers them the aspects of life that are attractive to them. Often they have a family, with young children. What they appear to find attractive is a congenial, safe neighborhood, with good public education, recreation, and cultural institutions – if only so their children will be exposed to music, theater, dance, and art. Public safety, social services, municipal transportation, and quality housing are other important factors. Suitable housing is, of course, at the top of the list.

All of these factors work together to create the quality of life that will make a specific city a place that is attractive to them. Without these amenities, it is highly unlikely that any city will be able to successfully compete with other cities that are successful in putting together an attractive package of urban amenities.

Chapter 8 – looking forward

Examination of the “consequences” of quality of life on a range of elements of human life, and then on the “components” of quality of life takes us to a very broad consideration of the major aspects of our individual and community lives. The concept of “quality of life” has itself evolved during the past several decades, apace with changes in the nature of our economy. All of this may at times appear to be a bit messy or disorganized, but this is in the nature of meeting the needs of individuals in a world of flux.

In the concluding chapter, we will, among other things, consider the nature of quality of life in the world after the initial onslaught of the coronavirus. The perhaps long-term restructuring of the major elements in our economic, social and cultural structures and in our individual and collective lives will have to be considered. The way we move through spaces, our access to healthcare, the impact on social institutions and behaviors, the impact on transportation, property markets, the service sector, entertainment from sports to opera, travel, engagement with other people in other places, and so many other things that make up our quality of life will have to be reconsidered before we conclude our discussion.
REFERENCES


