



# Our cities' pasts haunt their growth

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## Cities started for two reasons

They were either points of geographic supply – offering minerals, a river crossing, or a point of defence – or they were trading locations at important crossroads. Those crossroads of trade soon became centres of exchange and drew further growth, while supply towns spawned industries that attracted and fostered business. Then a third type established itself: religious, administrative and educational centres.

They were either added to the original city, like Oxford or Cambridge, or created anew, like Brasilia or Canberra. Either way, they became the centre of the exchange of knowledge for powerful and influential people.

In turn, this attracted more growth, but the result was cities far more diverse than those built on exploiting raw resources or even trade. They had national or global draw, as the seats of power and learning.

Despite these attributes, the ability of the most successful cities to provide infrastructure is all too easily overwhelmed by population growth. The end result was pollution and overcrowding.

Skip forward to 1947, and the Town and Country Planning Act is introduced in the UK. Slum clearances, green belt growth control, and new towns spring from a modernist desire to improve people's quality of life.

The condition of the Oxford Cambridge Arc has been shaped by this altruistic action. The problem is that this policy constrained the knowledge cities and hampered their potentially global reach and instead, founded new towns – with no anchor in raw materials, trade or knowledge.

The result is a falsified version of Christaller's Central Place Theory: natural centres of exchange and learning, shaped though hundreds of years of growth and migration, were artificially compressed. Others were forced to grow, but without being given the assets needed.

Gradually, movement patterns and people's quality of life within this structure have become untenable.

### **What is needed is a regional re-think.**

Regeneration at a regional scale, not tinkering about at the edges, but with a full reset: Radical Regeneration.

It is difficult to add new centres of geographic supply or centres of trade with the changes being wrought by online commerce but there is a natural fit with the knowledge economy. A knowledge exchange remains a powerful driver of growth and can touch every aspect of society, economy and environment.

**A knowledge-based economy has the potential to create diverse and resilient locations through its length of supply chains and breadth of employment opportunities, as the foundation for future regeneration.**



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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S.A. Charlton'.