

DIFFERENT FABRICS "SHRINK" IN DIFFERENT MANNERS

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Introduction

This paper presents some findings related to the phenomenon of the "loss of concentration" as it appears in the metropolitan area of Rosario (Santa Fe Province, Argentina).

We call "metropolitan area" a specific type of human settlement that

- is made up by a number of districts (originally urban centres in their own), each one with its local institutions
- functions as an *integrated urban area*, regardless of its multiple jurisdictional structure
- undergoes a more-or-less significant process of expansion
- presents a non clear-cut urban/rural interface

Rosario City and its surroundings make a settlement of this kind (see figure). "Metropolitan Rosario" is formed by sixteen Municipalities (the major of which is Rosario proper), with a high level of integration in different dimensions of production processes, and particularly in the labour market. This complex urban area occupies (together with metropolitan Córdoba) the second rank in the Argentinean urban system's hierarchy, its population being slightly over 1.2 million.

In historical terms, the Paraná river's coast has been the main structuring factor of this micro-region: it has organized the first human settlements, it has conditioned the railways layout –and, later, the roads network-, and it has attracted the major productive locations. The resulting spatial structure of this metropolitan area develops in several "tentacles" in the territory, with an important degree of functional specialization per parts (expression of "metropolitan complementation"). Namely, and just to give a sample of this, it is in the northern extension where more industries have developed, it is in the west extension where most low-density residential developments have located, it is in the central district where more specialized services are found. But beyond these signs of functional specialization, the prevailing urban fabric is basically heterogeneous in use and form, and mostly rather compact (although not necessarily very dense).

Loss of concentration: the causes

The phenomenon of loss of concentration is not alien to metropolitan Rosario, even though it appears in this context with less intensity than in some other places. To what extent can this phenomenon be attributed here to *cyberspace*? Evidence shows that loss of concentration in this environment is the result of the inter-play of different factors, among which is indeed the growing importance of new communications technologies (producing a sort of *virtual space*); but besides this there are other factors, namely the increase in the *motorization rate of local population* –in connection with the development of the roads network- as well as the diffusion of *patterns of life* originated in more advanced capitalist societies.

The "new" virtual space made possible by the most recent development of communication technologies is a

fact in Argentina as well as in metropolitan Rosario. In other words, technological innovation in communications is applied here practically in "real time" with respect to its appearance in the global scenario—even though its level of diffusion in local community appears tempered by social inequality. Some figures show very clearly different manifestations of these new processes:

- The number of telephones supplied by Telecom (the most important telephone company in the part of the country where Rosario is located) has increased from 1.56 million in 1990 to 3.58 million in 1999, this last figure implying a 7% increase with respect to the previous year (1998).
- Argentina's mobile telephone market has grown over 35% in 1999. Telecom's mobile telephone branch (which has a market share of 70% in the Northern part of the country) has seen a 39% increase in the number of clients during 1999 alone.
- The Internet services supplier of the same company (Arnet, born in March 1998) has had an increase in the number of clients of almost 300% during 1999.
- The number of Internet users in the country today (June 2001) is 45% over the number of users a year ago.

Together with this relatively "new" phenomenon of *cyberspace* we can also find in Rosario and its surroundings the effects of a significant increase in the quantity of vehicles moving in the region's roads. One figure is quite meaningful in this regard: the number of cars registered in the City of Rosario—the main district of this metropolis—was in 1998 2.2 times the number corresponding to the year 1980. Quite differently from the *cyberspace* phenomenon, this one cannot be considered "new". On the contrary, while the enhancement of a "virtual" space due to the development of new communications technologies sets Rosario—and Argentina as a whole—in a very contemporary scene, the increase in the motorization rate is the expression of a less mature—as compared to "more advanced societies"—stage of development. In any case, the increase in the number of vehicles goes hand-in-hand with the development of the regional roads network, this meaning that both factors influence one on the other, and *together* produce some effect on the loss of concentration. Particularly, two projects are to be mentioned in this regard (see figure): the East-bound connection to Victoria (on the other side of the Paraná river and the 60 km-wide lowlands area that runs along it) and the West-bound motorway to Córdoba (in the centre of the country). In fact, both projects *and* the increased motorization rate are making possible the emergence of different initiatives for *less concentrated* residential and productive settlements.

A third factor causing the loss of concentration in this environment is the diffusion of some *patterns of life*, specially linked to forms of residence and to consumption behaviours, "imported" from more advanced capitalist societies, and in particular from North America. Basically two phenomena need to be mentioned in this regard. One of them is the growing diffusion of what we could call the *suburban life style*, deeply rooted in the (North) American urban tradition but with little—if any—historical development in Argentina, and more specifically in Rosario and its surroundings. The other one is the growing importance of "new" *forms of commerce* (supermarkets and shopping malls) located outside the city core and in close contact with the mobility infrastructure. These forces—of a "cultural" nature, we could say—are having a significant impact on the production of less concentrated forms of habitat in Rosario's metropolitan area.

Loss of concentration: the facts

Those being the factors underlying the loss of concentration in Rosario's metropolitan region, it is necessary

to present now those *sectors of activity* in which the phenomenon appears more clearly. They are the *services sector*, the *industry sector*, and the *residential sector*.

The services sector is perhaps where the impact of new communication technologies can be seen as the strongest cause of loss of concentration. More specifically, it is in relation to *banking* -one of the two activities that need a special mention here- that one can see most clearly that impact. In fact, it has been due to the massive application of such technologies that banks have been able, not only to multiply their services, but also to move them from their traditional central location as well as to free them from time constraints (*24-hours-a-day banking*). This is a process that has taken place basically in the last decade, producing a remarkable change in the way bank services appear in the territory and in the way people use them; one of the main consequences of this change being the (partial) migration to the periphery of a traditionally central activity, with the subsequent risk of "impoverishment" –in functional and symbolic terms- of the city core.

The other activity to be mentioned within the service sector is *commerce*. In fact, some "new" forms of commerce have had an important development in the last ten years in metropolitan Rosario: major supermarkets and shopping malls have appeared in the margins of the consolidated city and in close relation to main roads (see figure). This is a phenomenon that cannot be attributed mainly to *cyberspace*, but to the other two factors that were mentioned: the increase in motorization and the diffusion of non-local ("imported") patterns of life. But in any case, this is a key manifestation of the loss of concentration in this particular context: commercial activity, traditionally linked to city centre, has increased significantly its presence away from that centre, and this is weakening the city core's strength and vitality.

As far as industry's behaviour in this regard is concerned, and leaving aside the question of the de-industrialization process that has taken place in the region during the last ten years, a tendency to lose concentration can be noticed. While in the past the dominating form of industrial settlements was mostly *compact* and *in direct contact with urban fabric*, the major industrial establishments settled in the recent past in Rosario's region –namely, the new factory-and-port complexes of agro-business, and an important plant of the automobile industry (GM)- present *suburban* characteristics (see figure). Certainly, one reason for this lies in the fact that the more-densely-urbanized Northern part of the agglomeration, traditionally preferred for industrial settlements, has become practically saturated near the river coast, and consequently new projects need to look for new locations; but there is no doubt that recent developments in communications as well as in roads and railways infrastructure have made possible this change in location patterns.

Residential developments also show the effects of loss of concentration. It is necessary to recall that residential settlements in local urban tradition are, if not highly dense, rather compact, in a wall-to-wall aggregation of individual houses; and when less compact patterns are found it is usually due to a form of "poor sub-urbanization" (that is a mostly self-constructed habitat, with a significant number of empty lots, that takes place in the outskirts of the city, where low land-prices and scarce rules are present). Instead, middle and high-class sub-urbanization is a rather new phenomenon, dependant upon those three factors already mentioned: cultural changes, motorization-rate increase, *and* development in communication technologies. This new type of developments goes hand-in-hand with a clear loss of interest –by the same social actors- for central-city dwellings. In choosing their location, those new initiatives tend to prefer the West extension of metropolitan Rosario –in direct connection with the recently opened first part of the Rosario/Córdoba motorway (see figure)- an area that has traditionally had some presence of weekend dwellings in a "garden-city"-like pattern of settlement. At the moment (June 2001), 735 hectares are being developed in this manner only in that part of the agglomeration; needless to say that this very significant quantity goes far beyond the "physiological" expansion needs of this urban system.

Challenges

Planners have to face different challenges in their attempt to manage the loss of concentration in human settlements in this part of the world. In the first place, the very problems to be faced are starting to loose (part of) their physical condition. But besides this general question, other challenges are to be expressed in much more concrete terms. As it was already mentioned, loss of concentration may deprive the city core of its traditional strength and vitality: different services, historically linked to city centre (like banking and commerce), have partially freed themselves from the need of a central location or, even, have started to "prefer" a sub-urban location. This is affecting downtowns and poses the challenge of formulating actions to manage these processes. But on the other term of the equation, sub-urban developments pose the challenge of having to deal with new forms of settlements and new actors, local administrations usually not being equipped –neither technically nor culturally- to cope with that. Sub-urban developments may also create some heavy burdens on local governments' finances through an increase in public services demand, and they may as well enhance social and spatial segregation (since recent initiatives of this kind are mostly meant for upper middle class and high class). Moreover, the transformations that are taking place in Rosario's metropolitan area –and the phenomenon of loss of concentration among them- make increasingly evident the integration of this micro-region, both in terms of problems to face and in terms of projects to design; but the institutional framework lies far behind these evidences.

All this poses the need to:

- Identify new development patterns to cope with sub-urban settlements
- Design new tools to face the "migration" of central activities to the suburbs
- Formulate policies aimed at counterbalancing segregation
- Invest in managerial capacity-building at local level
- Develop the capacity to coordinate among different local administrations within the metropolitan area, as well as between them and higher levels of government (Provincial and Federal).

These challenges appear in the context of a dramatic maturation of awareness regarding the obstacles there are in the way to an *efficacious* –whatever this may mean- planning, mainly due to the ever growing (consciousness about the) complexity of the relations between space and society. Paradoxically enough, this happens while the knowledge and the analysis of the *object* of planning (city and environment) are being extraordinarily reinforced by technological development.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of the "loss of concentration" in contemporary space can be found also in Rosario's metropolitan area; in other words, space "shrinks" here too. However, in this context the phenomenon presents some peculiar characteristics. In the first place, loss of concentration is *less intense* here than in "more advanced" capitalist societies. Besides, the phenomenon depends not solely upon the innovations in communications technologies, but also on the growth of motorization and on cultural changes. These peculiarities are to be explained by the level of relative development of local society. Particularly, the concepts of "dual society" and "dual time" as characteristic of "less developed" societies provide a key to understand the presence of advanced components of social life (like *cyberspace*) mixed with backward

components. The resulting situation may be seen as the combined effect of all these components on space.