

Why The 'Livable Cities' Rankings Are Wrong

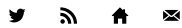


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Few topics stir more controversy between urbanists and civic boosters than city rankings. What truly makes a city "great," or even "livable"? The answers, and how these surveys determine them, are often subjective, narrow or even misguided. What makes a "great" city on one list can serve as a detriment on another.

Recent rankings of the "best" cities around the world by the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#), [Monocle magazine](#) and the [Mercer quality of life surveys](#) settled on a remarkably similar list. For the most part, the top ranks are dominated by well-manicured older European cities such as Zurich, Geneva, Vienna, Copenhagen, Helsinki and Munich, as well as New World metropolises like Vancouver and Toronto; Auckland, New Zealand; and Perth and Melbourne in Australia.

Only *Monocle* put a truly cosmopolitan world city--Tokyo--near the top of its list. The *Economist* rankings largely snubbed American cities--only Pittsburgh made it anywhere near the top, at No. 29 out of 140. The best we can say is most American cities did better than Harare, Zimbabwe, which ran at the bottom. Honolulu got a decent No. 11 on the *Monocle* list and broke into the top 30 on Mercer's, as did No. 29 San Francisco. But regarding American urban boosters, that's all, folks.

To understand these rather head-scratching results, one must look at the criteria these surveys used. Cultural institutions, public safety, mass transit, "green" policies and other measures of what is called "livability" were weighted heavily, so results skewed heavily toward compact cities in fairly prosperous regions. Most of these regions suffer only a limited underclass and support a relatively small population of children. In fact, most of the cities are in countries with low birthrates--Switzerland's median fertility rate, for example, is about 1.4, one of the lowest on the planet and a full 50% below that of the U.S.

These places make ideal locales for groups like traveling corporate executives, academics and researchers targeted by such surveys. With their often lovely facades, ample parks and good infrastructure, they constitute, for the most part, a list of what Wharton's Joe Gyourko calls "productive resorts," a sort of business-oriented version of an Aspen or Vail in Colorado or Palm Beach, Fla. Honolulu is an exception, more a vacation destination than a bustling business hub.

Yet are those the best standards for judging a city? It seems to me what makes for great cities in history are not measurements of safety, sanitation or homogeneity but economic growth, cultural diversity and social dynamism. A great city, as Rene Descartes wrote of 17th century Amsterdam, should be "an inventory of the possible," a place of imagination that attracts ambitious migrants, families and entrepreneurs.

Such places are aspirational--they draw people not for a restful visit or elegant repast but to achieve some sort of upward mobility. By nature these places are chaotic and often difficult to navigate. Ambitious people tend to be pushy and competitive. Just think about the great cities of history--ancient Rome, Islamic Baghdad, 19th century London, 20th century New York--or contemporary Los Angeles, Houston, Shanghai and Mumbai.

These represent a far different urbanism than what one finds in well-organized and groomed Zurich, Vienna and Copenhagen. You would not call these cities and their ilk with metropolitan populations generally less than 2 million, "bustling." Perhaps a more fitting words would be "staid" and "controlled."

Peace and quiet is very nice, but it doesn't really encourage global culture or commerce. Growth and change come about when newcomers jostle with locals not just as tourists, or orbiting executives, but as migrants. Great cities in their peaks are all about this kind of yeasty confrontation.

Alas, comfort takes precedence over dynamism in these new cities. Take the immigration issue: Unlike Amsterdam in its heyday or London or New York today, most northern European countries have turned hostile to immigration and many have powerful nativist parties. These are directed not against elite corporate executives or academics, but newcomers from developing countries. In some cases, resentment is stoked by immigrants [taking advantage of well-developed welfare systems](#) that worked far better in a homogeneous country with shared attitudes of social rights and obligations.

Of course, these cities aren't total deadweights. After all, Switzerland has its banks, Helsinki boasts Nokia and Denmark remains a key center of advanced and green manufacturing technology. For its part, Vancouver gets Americans to shoot cheap movie and TV shows with massive tax breaks and will host the Winter Olympics. But none can be considered major shapers of the modern world economy.

The one American city favored by *The Economist*, Pittsburgh, represents a pale--and less attractive--version of these top-ranked European, Canadian or Australian cities. Its formerly impressive array of headquarters has shrunk to a handful. Once the capital of steel, it now pretty much depends on nonprofits, hospitals and universities.

You will be hearing a lot more about Pittsburgh--the city has a prodigious PR machine funded largely by nonprofit foundations and universities--as it gets ready to host the G-20 meeting next month. Fans claim that the former steel town has developed a stable--if hardly dynamic--economy. Its torpidity is being sold a strength; boom-resistant in the best of times, it's also proved [relatively recession-proof as well](#).

In this sense, Pittsburgh represents the American model of the slow-growth European

city. This may appeal to those doing quality-of-life rankings, but not to those who have been fleeing the Steel City for other places for generations. Immigrants are hardly coming in droves either--Pittsburgh ranks near last among major metropolitan areas in percentage of foreign-born residents. As longtime local columnist and resident Bill Steigerwald notes, since 1990 more Pittsburghers have been dying than being born. If this represents America's urban future, perhaps it's one that takes its inspiration from Alan Weisman's "A world without us."

Yet the future of urbanism, here and abroad, will not be Pittsburgh. Based on current preferences, something like 20 million--or more--people will have moved to U.S. cities by 2050. Most will likely settle in more dynamic places like New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Phoenix, Dallas, Chicago and Miami. These cities have become magnets for restless populations, both domestic and foreign-born. They also contain all the clutter, constant change, discomfort and even grime that characterize great cities through history.

But it's economics that drives migrants to these dirtier, busier metropolitan centers. Many of the cities at the top of the livability lists, by contrast, are [also among the world's most expensive](#). They generally also have high taxes and relatively stagnant job markets.

Many U.S. cities, however, offer far more materially to their average residents than their elite European counterparts do. American cities, [when assessed by purchasing-power parity](#), notes demographer Wendell Cox, do very well indeed. Viewed this way, the U.S. boasts eight of the top 10--and 37 of the top 50--metropolitan regions in terms of per capita income.

The top city on Cox's list, San Jose, Calif., epitomizes both the strengths and weaknesses of the American city. The heartland of Silicon Valley, the San Jose region has generated one of the world's most innovative--and well-paid--economies. On the other hand, its mass transit usage is minuscule, its cultural attributes measly and its downtown hardly a tourist destination.

Meanwhile, pricey and scenic Zurich, No. 2 on the Mercer list and No. 10 on *The Economist* rankings, comes in 74th when considering adjusted per capita income. *Economist* favorite Vancouver, one of the most expensive second-tier cities on the planet, ranks 71st. For the average person seeking to make money and improve his or her economic status, it usually pays not to settle in one of the world's "most livable" cities.

This is not to say that rambunctious urban centers like Los Angeles, New York or London could learn from their more "livable" counterparts. Anyone who has braved the maddening crowds in Venice Beach, Times Square or London's Piccadilly knows a city can have too much of a good thing. Los Angeles could use a more efficient bus system. Better-maintained subways and commuter trains in New York would be welcome by millions as they would in Greater London.

Ultimately great cities remain, almost by necessity, raw (and at times unpleasant) places. They are filled with the sights and smells of diverse cultures, elbowing streetwise entrepreneurs and the inevitable *mafiosi*. They all suffer the social tensions that come

with rapid change and massive migration. New York, Los Angeles, London, Shanghai, Mumbai or Dubai may not shoot to the top of more elite, refined rankings, but they contain the most likely blueprint of our urban future.

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