

**11.329 Social Theory and the City**  
**Exercise 1: Center and Periphery**  
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Urban planning's concern with concepts of center and periphery relates to the spatial relationships between elements of urban form and how these elements are perceived by people. These concepts can be applied to the scale of the region, the city, and the district. This brief discussion focuses on notions of city center and periphery.

At the scale of the city, physical elements of the urban environment include buildings, neighborhoods, commercial and industrial areas, natural features, schools, pathways and transportation routes, open spaces, and myriad other components. The difference between center and periphery is a difference of location within the geographic area of the city and of spatial relationships.

The center represents the concentration of particular social, economic, political, and cultural activities. The periphery, in contrast, is defined by distance from the center, physically, socially, or economically. As such, center and periphery are linked by an understanding of what is, and what is not, central to economic relations, cultural life, and/or political power.

City center and periphery are often defined by architectural expressions, symbols in the built world. These fixed elements, as material forms, represent what takes place in a certain space and who belongs there. Thus, the glass and steel towers of the twentieth century downtown express the city center as a concentration of corporate power, while at the same time serving as a symbol of the city as a whole, as a skyline. The periphery is the edge, where the city meets ocean or mountain, or where it physically unwinds and scatters out. From here, one may be able to view the center while at the same time one has a sense of being distant from it. In this way, symbols are used to reinforce notions of power.

However, centers are not always expressed with the blunt visual force of the skyscraper or the corporate downtown. Centers of activity or culture or economy may be expressed in other forms- in civic monuments, in public spaces, in infrastructure- or they may be hidden, or only known to privileged few. As such, the meaning of center and periphery differ based on perception. These

perceptions may differ by individual or by group, based on understandings of what is significant and where it occurs.

And although built forms encourage, celebrate, or privilege certain activities over others, cultural forms can be independent of architectural forms. Thus, people, unlike buildings and other fixed material features can move across urban spaces, across neighborhoods and commercial districts, between public and private spheres. One may travel from one part of the city to another and human activity may be distributed across space in ways that are not necessarily reflected in the built form. Understanding the city in this way requires an understanding of culture and social relations. The downtown skyline may symbolize one sort of center, while a park or plaza or even a basement or a garage may be a center, too.

Concepts of center and periphery can also stand for cultural understandings of what it means to be an insider versus and outsider. While the insider may have a good idea of what activities take place in the center, this view may be particular or short-sided. In a crowded public place, for example, being at the center may mean being surrounded by others, but unaware of what the larger crowd is doing. The view from the periphery may yield a better understanding of the crowd and the place. In this way, too, center and periphery are linked together. The state of being an outsider is defined by the fact that others are insiders.

Concepts of center and periphery appear and reappear in the realm of planning practice, in studies of land values, open space, economic agglomerations and firm location, and public space. As planners, we might reconsider how these terms are employed and what connotations they carry.