Discussion:

The Spatial Organization of Cities - Land

- “Backyarding”, by Jan Brueckner
- “Compactness”, by Vernon Henderson

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What led to the current spatial organization of cities?

Two examples from Africa

- “Backyarding”, by Jan Brueckner, Claus Rabe, and Harris Selod
  - Intensive margin: land use at the parcel level
  - Determinants: private decisions of landlords and tenants

  - Intensive and extensive margin: compactness and street layout at the neighborhood/city level
  - Long-run determinants: French vs. British colonial origin
“Backyarding”, by Brueckner, Rabe, Selod

- A previously unstudied phenomenon
  - Backyard shacks = informal sublets in the backyards of owner-occupied, government-subsidized house

- Beyond South Africa, patterns common in developing countries:
  - A range of tenure modes between formal and informal
  - Anecdotal evidence of slum dwellers renting out public housing instead of living there

- Key findings:
  - Owners trade-off consumption of backyard space vs. rental income
  - More backyarding in areas with better job access
“Backyarding”, by Brueckner, Rabe, Selod

What can we learn from backyarding by revealed preferences?

- Backyards as an alternative to slums
- Value of job and service access
- True demand for space among low-income households

Policy implications

- Misallocation in public housing?
  - Rationale / political economy of RPD housing program design?
- Should something be done about backyarding?
  - Efficiency enhancing? Counterfactual?
  - Are there negative externalities?
- Implications for land use regulations: minimum lot sizes
Some comments on the empirics

- Current analysis: comparison in quantities across locations.
  With more data:
  - Rents
    - Comparison with slums
  - Time variation?

- Control for more location characteristics
  - E.g.: distances from landmarks, topography... etc
  - Why were certain locations selected for RDP housing?

- Beyond job access:
  - Services access: schools, health centers... (from Openstreetmap?)
  - Markets and retail

- Impressive data collection: over 300 African cities
  - Measure properties of the urban fabric: sprawl, regularity of street networks
  - Metrics comparable across cities
  - Levels and changes

- Key findings:
  - Long-lasting impact of colonial origin on urban form
    - French-origin cities are more compact and with a more regular (grid-like) street network
    - Old and new parts of the city: more than just physical persistence in colonial structures
  - More compact neighborhoods provide better access to utilities to residents
Mechanisms: a legacy of...?

- Legal institutions: property rights, enforcement, common law vs civil law...

- Preferences and architectural style (e.g. “Garden city” paradigm)

- Other determinants (potentially different between French and British)
  - Military / security considerations
  - Public health (e.g. green belts / cordons sanitaires etc.)
Mechanisms: a legacy of...?

Variation within colonial power would be helpful

- Legal institutions: property rights, enforcement, common law vs civil law...
  - French Civil Code declared applicable at different times?
  - Variation in local land tenure systems
  - Development occurring outside official city boundaries

- Preferences and architectural style (e.g. "Garden city" paradigm)
  - Size of expatriate population?

- Other determinants (potentially different between French and British)
  - Military / security considerations
  - Public health (e.g. green belts /cordons sanitaires etc.)
    - Cities that experienced outbreaks?
    - Ecology of vector-born diseases?
Colonial origins → urban form today → outcomes?

- Pollution
- Economic activity: firms, retail
- Public goods / amenities (from Openstreetmap?)
- Compactness of French cities may be good for service delivery...
- ...but heavy-handedness in urban planning may be undesirable in other dimensions (e.g. restrictive land use regulations)?

Data

- Informal settlements captured by the GHLS dataset?
The spatial organization of cities

How should cities be configured to promote growth / quality of life?

- **What we do know:**
  - Urban expansion involves reconfiguration of cities at the intensive and extensive margin
  - Spatial layout has implications for economic activity, public service delivery, transit...
  - Spatial structure of cities is determined by policy, geography, history, markets

- **Why we should learn more:**
  - Urban transformation will require physical investments with persistent effects
  - Concerns: dynamic inefficiency / misallocation

- **How we can learn more:**
  - Data for future research: remote sensing + surveys