

# A Tale of Three Cities

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St. Petersburg, Glasgow, and Dubai exemplify the different development strategies that cities are using to position themselves for the 21st century's opportunities.

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On the face of it, the three cities could hardly be more different. ST. PETERSBURG, the capital of czarist Russia as it opened up to the influence of western Europe in the 1700s, still makes a centerpiece of that epoch. GLASGOW is the archetype of a 19th-century industrial city, with an overlay of the arts and crafts movement that went along with it. DUBAI, in contrast, is a boomtown, arising from an almost blank slate.

Each city has a different agenda for development. St. Petersburg needs to attract investment to enable growth and change. Glasgow has to reinvent itself as a place and as an economy. And Dubai is recycling its oil revenues to become the Middle East's premier business and leisure destination.

## **The Territory of Urban Planning**

Together, these cities exemplify the typical range of urban conditions encountered today in many of the world's metropolitan regions. Each condition calls for a different development strategy to position the city for the challenges ahead. In western Europe, that means a declining population and a shifting economy. In Dubai, as in coastal China, it means faster growth, with the accompanying problem of how to sustain it. What they share is the determination to thrive in this new century. And this ambition sets the stage for urban-scale development—large and complex projects whose aim is to help each city build on its strengths and overcome its challenges.

## **Three Cities, Three Different Contexts**

Christened a “window to Europe” by founder Peter the Great in 1703, St. Petersburg served as the Russian capital for more than 200 years. The 1917 Revolution interrupted, but did not stem,

St. Petersburg's ascent to 4.5 million inhabitants. The fourth largest European city, it remains Russia's preeminent academic and cultural center, despite being eclipsed by Moscow as the country's political and commercial capital. The city was built on what were a hundred islands formed by a labyrinth of rivers, creeks, and canals. Its stone bridges and granite embankments knit together its historic urban fabric of palaces, cathedrals, and monuments.

Although St. Petersburg's architectural distinction makes it an international destination, considerable economic development is required for it to compete with other western European cities. The Russian economy's radical transformation since perestroika is only now beginning to bear fruit, fueled by insatiable global demand for oil and gas. Like London and Paris before it, St. Petersburg needs to provide the financial and service facilities required to enable economic growth and attract international investment.

Glasgow, by contrast, has had little in the way of impetus for economic development. From the city's zenith in 1950, the population waned from 1.2 million to today's 640,000—a decline that accompanied the collapse of its heavy industrial economy. Even more dramatic is the descent of its East End, a center of shipbuilding and ship repair, from 150,000 people in the early fifties to 19,000 today. Large swaths of Glasgow are still vacant, while in other former industrial cities in the U.K., those vacancies are being filled by the postindustrial, knowledge-based sectors. So the goal for Glasgow is two-fold: attract those same sectors and put a floor under the city's decline by restoring its quality of life along with its economic fortunes.

In the span of 20 years, Dubai masterfully transformed itself from a modest trade port to a manufacturing hub, to what is now a tourism and service-oriented international city. Population growth from 150,000 in 1950 to today's 1.3 million inhabitants bears witness to the success of the city's reinvention strategies. Fueled by vast liquidity, Dubai's boomtown development has stimulated and accommodated growth more aggressively than any other city outside China. Its next move aims to provide commercial stability in an unstable region by attracting international investors and major global companies to a new world financial center. To accomplish this, Dubai must cultivate a robust, secure economy to match its international stature.

### Looking for a Global Viewpoint

Planners create a framework for realizing a vision of a city's future, but their role in shaping that vision varies, depending on when they are brought in. In Dubai, the idea of developing a new international financial center was widely accepted when we began our work. In St. Petersburg, the strong desire to preserve the city's historic core made peripheral development inevitable, but there was no agreement on what it would become. Glasgow, too, saw the need to redevelop but not how this could be done.

In contemplating a major piece of their future development, all three cities sought a planning team that could build on their own detailed knowledge of local conditions and bring a globally informed outsider's perspective that could help them discover new possibilities and determine the best way to move forward.

### Different Issues, Different Solutions

Glasgow's problem is to bring a 19th-century industrial district into the postindustrial era. The Clyde Gateway project is an effort by the City of Glasgow to stem and reverse the East End's physical and economic decline through redevelopment. The actual site of the project was not yet defined when we were hired, so one of our first tasks as planners was to designate a 2,000-acre area in the East End for revitalization.

Our plan for the area sought physical transformation as well as perception change, with the goal of making the East End a desirable place to live and work. We gave the city a framework for upgrading or replacing obsolete buildings and infrastructure there, both to restore the area's quality and to make it functionally suited to a variety of new uses. Each phase of redevelopment can attract and support population growth so that in 20 years the area will more than double in population, with 50,000 residents.

In Dubai, the local conditions center around dealing with the city's climate and need for infrastructure. Dubai's summers are some of the hottest in the world, while its winters are mild. Occupying a smaller area than London, Dubai is being developed relatively intensively—Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC) packs 20 million square feet of new development onto 100 acres, a density typical of the central business districts of many western European cities.

DIFC's plan established an urban-scale fabric that enabled phased construction of buildings and infrastructure, a necessity in any large, market-driven project. It also zoned the site vertically, with three climate-controlled levels below grade and three above. The latter incorporate parks, squares, green space,

and pathways—a pedestrian setting that is much used in the winter. The former mitigate Dubai’s brutal summer.

With St. Petersburg, the issue is the collision between the need to grow and modernize and the desire to preserve a historic center that is one of the most beautiful in Europe. Hence the city’s decision to opt for a strategy similar to London’s redevelopment of its Docklands—building a new urban district on reclaimed waterfront land at the western end of Vasilievsky Island. While London failed to halt highrise construction within its central core, St. Petersburg intends to follow the example of Paris, which clustered new office towers outside the city in the financial district of La Défense.

In contrast to Dubai, St. Petersburg’s winters are the stuff of literature, while its summers are very pleasant. The area of the Vasilievsky Island redevelopment site is ten times larger than DIFC, amplifying the challenges of making it a comfortable place for people to live and work on a year-round basis. To mitigate the subzero winter weather, our plan creates a below-grade circulation level that will make it possible to move between buildings and to access the Metro without going outdoors. In addition to parks and other landscape amenities, many of the buildings will feature roof gardens to take full advantage of the summer.

Because everything will be built on newly reclaimed land that will extend the island, our plan artificially raises the ground plane to prevent flooding. Reclaimed land has to settle before it can be developed. That is an expensive process, which the plan phases so that each new parcel is tied to a reasonable expectation of market demand. To achieve a favorable return on investment, the plan calls for a development pattern of compact, “walkable,” transit-served neighborhoods that extend across the district.

### Setting the Stage for a Better Future

Despite their very different urban conditions, these three cities have in common that their future development cannot just recapitulate the past. Take Dubai. Unlike Shanghai, another of the world’s boomtowns, it lacked an “urban fabric,” as planners call it. Our plan for DIFC creates a precedent for its future development that is sustainable in terms of how it manages growth and deals with climate.

Our plan for Vasilievsky Island is a variation on the same theme. Despite Russia’s economic liberalization, St. Petersburg is still subject to many of the planning and building regulations of the Soviet era. So one of our roles as planners has been to instill new patterns of development suited to a 21st-century city.

Glasgow is yet another variation. Broad economic shifts left gaping holes in the city’s fabric, but its revival will never generate enough demand for new buildings to fill them. So our role as planners was to determine how to activate a former industrial setting with a broad range of uses—including recreational open space. It is reclamation of another kind, giving a severely deprived area a new lease on life.

Planners of urban-scale development often seem to be either projecting the present into the future or making predictions about what that future will be. Even in Dubai, plans of this scale are conditioned by people’s current expectations for the future, not least for a return on their investment. Good plans hedge those bets, building in an array of safeguards—flexibility most of all—that make it possible to implement their vision in stages, sometimes with entirely new components. What persists over time are the elements that define a vital sense of place and the well-judged underlying framework that makes growth and change possible. Good plans provide both. Like cities themselves, they are robust in many different ways.

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