



# Chapter 1

## The city spontaneous

Shortly after our daughter Olivia's birth in March 2007, my wife required a breast pump. This is common for new mothers expressing milk, but we were in the UK and our pump was in the US, and incompatible due to differing electricity standards in any case. While pumps are not terribly rare, they are medical devices and could only be acquired in real-time at a pharmacy. It was a Sunday evening, about 7 pm. In the US the 'I want it and I want it now' culture has produced a 24-hour/7-day-a-week/52-week-a-year expectation of availability of just about anything, including pumps. London, despite some surface similarities, is no Minneapolis. We were to find that all of the typical drug stores: namely Boots the Chemist and Superdrug were closed, not merely on our local High Street in Putney, but everywhere.

Fortunately, the Internet informed us that Zafash Pharmacy, London's only 24-hour pharmacy, on Old Brompton Road near Earl's Court was open. From our Putney flat, I took the 22 bus

there, got the goods, and returned on the 74 and 22 buses, with a total time of 67 minutes door-to-door-to-door. Google Maps put the distance at 3.4 miles via road, and said it would take 8 minutes by car ... there is not a chance this would have been true, even at 7 pm on a Sunday night. Along the way I encountered (and avoided) large numbers of drunk local footie fans coming from a Chelsea match, played nearby at Stamford Bridge.

Can it possibly be that London, England, a city of 8 million people, has only one 24-hour pharmacy? For a city that is a contender for 'capital of the world,' this is surprising. One could talk about Zafash, run by immigrants or maybe 2nd generation Londoners who have a unique entrepreneurial spirit, and how great that is. Still, it would be par for the course in the US. In my mind the question isn't why they are open, but why the others were closed.

Perhaps regulation has something to do with it, I don't know the extent to which neighborhoods have imposed zoning regulations limiting hours of operation, but restaurants and pubs could somehow figure out how to be open, despite their extra noise. Perhaps it is the costs of paying overtime. Perhaps it is the draining of the entrepreneurial spirit in this home to capitalism. Perhaps it is collusion, since if they are all closed, you will just have to shop when it is convenient for the chemist, not for you. In contrast, US pharmacies are in fierce competition with supermarkets (which have been 24 hours in many locales for a couple of decades now, starting since they were doing overnight stocking anyway).

While I could understand why the local stationers isn't 24 hours, paper is seldom an emergency item, drugs and medical equipment are. In addition to being bad for customers, it seems that business here is leaving money on the table.

Cities enable spontaneous action. In its strongest form, the ability to engage in 'spontaneous action' is the ability to do whatever, whenever. The phrasing might imply exciting and entertaining things: going out to a concert or a ballgame, playing parkour, kayaking on a river, or robbing a bank, but most things are quite mundane, from getting a pint-of-milk to going to the apothecary.

Spontaneous action requires at least two elements.

The first is the presence of things to do. The thing must be where I want it to be, and it must be open or available when I want to use it.

The second is the ability to reach those things. I need to have a means of transporting myself conveniently from where I am, to where I want to be, when I want to go there.

In short, there must be both destinations and networks that satisfy action.

In the real world, spontaneous action is limited to what others are willing to allow or accommodate. The world, fortunately, is no Springfield 'Do What You Feel Festival.' There are many things, that for technical or economic reasons, I cannot acquire, and many activities I cannot engage in because they do not exist. Others are prohibited by law or custom, like

robbing a bank, and thus have a high likelihood of imposing penalties I might not want, like attending prison or being transported to a foreign land. Others are simply discouraged by reputation effects, and the desire to not only do what I want today, but to retain the option to do what I want tomorrow.

There are many locations that have networks, and people who have vehicles, that allow them to move about easily. In any small town or rural area, someone who has a car can easily move about, but there is, from the big city perspective, nowhere to go. These areas have high mobility.

Some places have lots of activity, most notably high density cities. However because of crowding it may be difficult to move around very much, these places may be congested, limiting the speed and comfort of travel.

In the best cities, there are many places to go and things to do. In those cities, the network is constructed with appropriate differentiation so faster and direct links connect dense places. The relatively slow speed of large cities (compared with suburbs or rural areas) is compensated for by the short distance, so that these areas have high accessibility.

Different people want different things. If we all wanted the same things, life would be pretty boring. Still accessibility is something that almost everyone does want, though everyone also has a limit to how much money and time they will pay for it.

Places with higher accessibility allow more spontaneous action than places with lower accessibility. Land prices are higher in places with high accessibility both because of the scarcity of such places and their value.

There is a premium to be paid for the ability to engage in spontaneous action. In economic terms, this is an option value that people hold. Even if they never go to a club, or a show, or a game, or the museum, or the local dairy store, or the particular specialist shop (like the bookstore specializing in gambling books I found in London), accessibility gives them the option of engaging in that activity.

One opposite of spontaneous action is scheduled action. If I cannot engage in things when I want, I must plan in advance when to do them. This may be because of other people's constraints, or limitations to the transport system, or hours of business of the thing I seek. The advantage of a large city is the increased flexibility, the high frequency of transit services, and the increased likelihood of finding a 24-hour store specializing in what you seek (London's lack of 24-hour services notwithstanding).

New technologies make on-demand travel and activity easier. Without requiring the night bus and night train, mobility-as-a-service, ranging from taxis to car-sharing, to a future with cloud-commuting based driverless cars, relaxes many of the temporal constraints of travel for the

carless. Automation enables stores and services to be available 24 hours a day. One can imagine going to an unstaffed corner shop and being able to buy goods pretty easily. More futuristically, online purchasing (via voice control) with robotic or aerial drone deliveries make the acquisition of stuff easier.

Yet automation still has limits. Meeting of random people at a place requires other people to be there. Meeting specific people requires engaging in the frictions of pre-planning and coordination. But with apps for social connection with both friends and strangers, spontaneity reigns.