

# 'Best Places': Interurban Competition, Quality of Life and Popular Media Discourse

Eugene J. McCann

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**Summary.** This paper explores relationships between the politics of urban competitiveness and popular media discourse about the 'good life' and 'good places'. Specifically, it focuses on the influence of popular 'best places to live' rankings on urban policy in three US cities. It addresses two issues: how and why similar policies are transferred from place to place; and, how 'extra-economic' factors are mobilised in formulating local economic development policy. It argues that the media's role in these processes is understudied and that its normative discourse is powerful and political. This argument is influenced by and illustrative of a recent attempt to locate the study of discursive power much more centrally in political economy approaches to urban studies.

## Introduction

The politics of urban development and interurban competition have been the focus of a great deal of scholarship in urban studies in recent decades (Cochrane, 1999; Cochrane *et al.*, 1996; Cox, 1999; Cox and Mair, 1988; Hall and Hubbard, 1998; Jonas and Wilson, 1999a; Lauria, 1997; Logan and Molotch, 1987; Peck, 1995; Peck and Tickell, 1995). Over time, there has been an increasing attention to the role discourse and representation play in framing and facilitating the activities of urban growth coalitions (Boyle, 1999; Jessop, 1997; Jonas and Wilson, 1999b). Examples of competing discourses and of the discursive construction of place in the politics of local economic development have frequently been drawn from the popular media since local newspapers, magazines and television are regularly used as outlets

for various perspectives on the future of a place (for example, K. G. Ward, 2000a). It has also been argued that local media have a stake in advocating for urban growth given their own 'local dependence' (Cox and Mair, 1988). Nevertheless, the national popular media's role in promoting, legitimating and diffusing hegemonic ideas about the good life, good places and good local economic development policy has been relatively understudied.

This paper will investigate the relationship between urban policy-making and media discourse through a study of the 'best places' rankings produced annually by numerous popular magazines in the US. This study will allow me to address two key concerns at the heart of the contemporary literatures on the politics of local economic development and

*Eugene J. McCann is in the Department of Geography, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada V5A 1S6. Fax: 604 291 5841. E-mail: emccann@sfu.ca. The research upon which this paper is based was funded by a grant from the Ohio State University Research Foundation. The author would also like to acknowledge the hospitality of the Department of Geography at the University of Texas, Austin. Thanks to Rini Sumartojo for her research assistance and to Kevin Ward, Michael Timberlake and two anonymous reviewers for very helpful comments. The author is also grateful to the geographers at the University of Illinois, Wittenberg University and Ohio University to whom earlier versions of the paper had been presented. All arguments and conclusions are entirely the responsibility of the author.*

urban entrepreneurialism. The first concern is with the ways in which successful economic development policies formulated in one location are promoted to and adopted by other cities. This “serial reproduction” of policies, as Harvey (1989, p.10) referred to it in the original statement of the entrepreneurial city thesis, tends to foster ‘weak competition’ (Cox, 1995) and a ‘crowding’ in the marketplace (Jessop, 1998) that works to the detriment of most cities by fostering a ‘treadmill’ effect in which every city feels an external pressure to upgrade continually its policies, facilities, amenities and so on to stave off competition and maintain its position in the competitive urban hierarchy.<sup>1</sup> Its continued prevalence, however, makes it an important topic of on-going investigation that also resonates with the wider literature on ‘policy transfer’ that has emerged in recent years (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Peck and Theodore, 2001; Radaelli, 2000; Stone, 2000). The second concern in the contemporary literature is with the use of ‘extra-economic’ factors—i.e. the social, cultural and political elements of urban life—in the construction and legitimation of interurban economic competition (Jessop, 1997, 1998; Jessop and Sum, 2000). In his recent engagement with the entrepreneurial city thesis, Jessop (1997, p. 31) places “the entrepreneurial concern to create ‘new combinations’ of economic and/or extra-economic factors which will further urban and regional competitiveness” at the heart of his discussion. This attention to the porous boundaries of ‘the economic’ in local economic development is often less explicitly stated in other discussions of urban competition and politics, but it is a significant aspect of a great deal of contemporary writing on this topic (Jonas and Wilson, 1999b; McCann, 2002).

A study of the relationships between the popular media’s ‘best places’ rankings and the politics and policy of local economic development informs both of these concerns by outlining how media discourse anoints certain cities as successful and worth emulat-

ing and specifying the extra-economic aspects of local economic development that are currently valorised in localities across the country. The current impulse towards creating livable and attractive environments for certain class fractions as a central part of a wider economic development strategy provides a particularly clear insight into the politics of developing innovative ‘new combinations’.

Therefore, this paper will focus primarily on the influential lists of ‘best places to live’ produced by the personal finance publication, *Money* magazine since they are explicit in their combination of ‘economic’ and ‘extra-economic’ criteria. The paper will begin with more detailed discussions of contemporary scholarship on interurban competition and issues of livability and quality of life in the US. It will then draw on examples from three US cities: Lexington, Kentucky, Austin, Texas, and Columbus, Ohio. These cities are discussed because of certain important similarities, differences and connections. All are small or mid-sized cities that have little history of heavy industry and have grown rapidly since the 1970s. They contain the primary research universities of their respective states, are either the seat of state government or are located close to it and all locate issues of livability at the heart of their economic development strategies. They differ in terms of their popular reputation for livability and economic development, however. Austin has consistently ranked highly as a good place to live in the past decade, while Lexington and Columbus are generally not examples used in the national conversation on successful examples of innovative economic development policy. Both have created new economic development strategies explicitly aimed at emulating Austin’s success in creating an image as a good place to live, however. The paper concludes by arguing that the study of the relationships between media discourse and urban politics resonates with a more widespread attempt in urban studies to understand the power of discourse in the construction of urban economies.

### **Economy and Livability in the City: Changing Definitions and Conceptual Connections**

Developing social indicators intended to measure urban livability or quality is not the sole preserve of popular publications. It has been the focus of numerous social science research exercises since the 1960s (see Pacione, 1982 and 1990 for reviews). The purpose of much of this work has been to identify the salient aspects of city life that influence social well-being. On this basis, it is hoped to "advance the goal of a humane or livable city" (Pacione, 1990, p. 2). The vagueness of this goal and of the term 'quality of life' itself means that disparate research foci have been grouped under the rubric of 'urban livability' at different times. Geographers and others working with a range of theoretical and methodological frameworks have researched a variety of aspects of urban life and their effects on individuals and groups' quality of life: overcrowding, natural hazards and ambient environmental conditions, stressful events in everyday life, urban form in relation to ease of access and orientation, security and privacy, residential satisfaction and community ties, among others (Cutter, 1985; Pacione, 1990). A connecting theme among most of this work is its applied aspect; a concern with informing policy to promote better conditions of urban life for entire populations or particular social groups.

Since the 1980s, however, a related strand of academic work on urban livability has emerged that is more interested in urban quality of life as an object of consumption for mobile residents and, relatedly, as a selling point for cities. For example, Findlay *et al.*'s study of livability in British cities seeks to provide urban managers with a map of "where the best quality of life can be found" and a set of comparable indicators to measure the performance of their city in attracting "a person or family on the move" (Findlay *et al.*, 1998, p. 271). In this study, the main characteristics of high quality of life were low crime, pollution and cost of living

rates, racial harmony, and good health and shopping facilities. These, the authors argue, are all factors that can be changed for the better, given the correct urban policies. The relationship between livability, consumption and urban policy is maintained in the most recent US academic research on urban quality of life. Florida's work (Florida, 2000, 2002; Florida and Gates, 2001) focuses on the aspects of cities—amenities, environmental quality and social tolerance (acceptance of gay and lesbian communities, for instance)—that make them attractive to young 'knowledge workers'. By extension, Florida argues that policy-makers must understand how

The new economy dramatically transforms the role of the environment and natural amenities from a source of raw material and a sink for waste disposal to a key component of the total package required to attract talent and in doing so generate economic growth (Florida, 2000, p. 5).

Cities that rank highly as places with virtuous combinations of high technology, high amenity, and social tolerance in Florida's analyses include Seattle, Washington, the San Francisco Bay area, greater Boston, and Austin, Texas—cities that also frequently rank highly on the popular media's rankings of the best places in which to live and invest.

#### *Policy Innovation, the Media and Urban Quality of Life*

The changing definitions of quality of life and the changing purposes to which livability research has been put over the years emphasise the power-laden, political nature of this concept. As Ley has noted

One important form of power is the ability to define the terms of public discourse, and an eloquent example of this form of power is the career of the term 'urban livability'. Over its twenty years of widespread usage, the term has served a range of masters (Ley, 1990, p. 34).

The contemporary master of a great deal of

popular and academic livability research is the influential and highly political neo-liberal vision of the city as a commodity that should be branded and marketed as part of a wider process of interurban competition (Brenner and Theodore, 2002).

The marketing of cities with the intention of attracting the most desirable labour force or industry is not new, of course (Greenberg, 2000; Rutheiser, 1996, ch.1; S. Ward, 1998a, 1998b; Kearns and Philo, 1993). The impetus behind the scholarly interest in contemporary interurban competition can largely be attributed to Harvey's (1989) influential paper on the shift from managerialism to entrepreneurialism in late capitalism. Harvey's entrepreneurial city thesis hangs on three related arguments (Harvey, 1989, pp. 6–8). First, the on-going restructuring of economic and political relations at higher scales, including the national and the global, has entailed a fundamental change in the organisation of public policy in the US, Britain and other parts of the industrialised world. Secondly, with the rise of entrepreneurialism there has been a related shift in which power over policy at the local level is increasingly located in private institutions that control governing coalitions where state agencies play a facilitative role. The *risks* associated with development are borne largely by the public sector at the local level, however. This location of risk distinguishes the entrepreneurial city from previous rounds of civic boosterism. Thirdly, there is a refocusing away from policies primarily aimed at the provision and maintenance of public goods in a clearly demarcated territory. Instead, the initiatory or speculative impulse at the heart of urban entrepreneurialism is oriented towards the construction of spectacular sites or places that are hoped will stimulate further investment.

Recently, Jessop (1997, 1998; Jessop and Sum, 2000) has partially reformulated the entrepreneurial city thesis by replacing Harvey's emphasis on what institutions bear the risks associated with speculation, with a definition of entrepreneurialism in terms of *innovation* (Jessop, 1998, footnote 9).

Entrepreneurship ... involves the devising and realisation of new ways of doing things to generate above-average profits ... in the course of capitalist competition (Jessop, 1998, p. 83).

Nonetheless, the marketing of cities as nice places in which to live and attempts to rise to the top of popular best places rankings do not necessarily entail true innovation. Rather, many have noted that the ideologies, strategies and geography of urban entrepreneurialism—from the dominant definition of cities as primarily competitive entities to the serial reproduction of festival markets, waterfront developments, etc.—are very similar from place to place. Indeed, Harvey's original statement of the entrepreneurial thesis identifies this issue as one of the central problematics in the study of contemporary urbanisation

There seems to be a general consensus emerging throughout the advanced capitalist world that positive benefits are to be had by cities taking an entrepreneurial stance to economic development. What is remarkable, is that this consensus seems to hold across national boundaries and even across political parties and ideologies (Harvey, 1989, p. 4).

The hegemonic, normative discourse of interurban competition that sustains and encourages relative ideological conformity over large parts of the developed world is, as I will illustrate, tied up with the popular media's representation of cities and the urban system, including the publication of best places rankings. But what exactly are the linkages between media representations and what cities do to enhance their competitiveness? I suggest that there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between the formulation of contemporary local economic development policy and the media's production of these rankings.

On the one side of this relationship, the rankings gain a remarkably high level of importance and legitimacy by being seen to be taken seriously by politicians, public pol-

icy professionals, consultants, business leaders and private consultants, and local media (as I will illustrate in the following section). Therefore, they are represented by their publishers as being more than mere entertainment or simply of interest to a few mobile individuals, families or investors. They are, instead, presented as relatively weighty statements on the condition of US cities. The other side of this relationship involves the rankings' role as a discursive frame that both enables and legitimates entrepreneurial policy initiatives.

A discursive frame, in this sense, is a persuasive, widely accepted and powerful simplification of the world. It selectively identifies and connects certain elements of everyday life and place in a way that mobilises and legitimates a particular set of actions or policies while setting other understandings and agendas outside the bounds of consideration (Barnes and Duncan, 1992; Nash, 2000; Snow and Benford, 1992; Tarrow, 1992). 'Best places' rankings frame the complex US urban world through two related simplifications: first, they define the urban system as a primarily competitive complex and individual cities as fundamentally and naturally competitive entities, driven to vie with each other for first place; secondly, the rankings focus the terms of policy debate by defining cities' success relative to high levels of attention to middle-class livability concerns (for example, the apparently contradictory desires for high levels of amenities and low taxation) or to providing the proverbial 'good business environment' of low operating costs and highly skilled workers. (Of course, as Florida (2002) and Nevarez (2003) have shown, these two aspects are interconnected.)

These discursive simplifications resonate deeply with US urban politicians and policy professionals and, as a result, the rankings play an active role in enabling the implementation of entrepreneurial policy strategies. The link between the rankings and what these actors do to increase their city's competitiveness has at least two concrete elements. First, their unequivocal nature and the

constant circulation and repetition of their measurement criteria and results by national and local media outlets and, crucially, by the private consultants frequently hired by cities to envision strategies for their future (Jessop and Sum, 2000; Olds, 1997), provide cities with clear choices regarding policies they might enact, the goals they set themselves, the cities they choose to emulate and compete with, and so on. In the more extreme cases, the rankings come to be regarded as 'off the shelf' solutions to complex economic development problems. Secondly, the rankings and the policy solutions they suggest are constructed by national media with no easily perceptible links to the individual cities they feature. This lends them an aura of objectivity (which is reinforced by their constant repetition by a wide array of actors in the policy process) that can be used to legitimate the policy choices made by policy professionals in individual cities. A city's ranking at the top of a 'best places' list can, then, be discussed by local politicians as an objective affirmation of the city's high quality of life, as a mark of approval for its economic development policies and a marker of its importance within the US urban system.

Interurban competition is not only characterised by the repetition of a few dominant ideas about what makes a 'best place', however. Entrepreneurship defined as innovation entails, according to Jessop, new combinations of factors that will enhance urban competitiveness. He argues that these innovative combinations now involve an intermixing of economic and 'extra-economic' factors where the former are defined as "commodities and fictitious commodities" and the latter are political and social factors that are "economically relevant" but are "not monetised and/or do not enter directly into exchange relations" (Jessop and Sum, 2000, p. 2290). With the greater centrality of the 'extra-economic' come stronger links between innovation and marketing (Jessop, 1998, p. 84) and a related rise in the importance of image, representation and narrative in urban policy formulation which is reflected in a significant literature on the topic

(Kearns and Philo, 1993; Paddison, 1993; Sadler, 1993; Short and Kim, 1998; Short *et al.*, 1993; Waitt, 1999; K. G. Ward, 2000a, 2000b). These stronger links between marketing and innovation involve “opening new markets—whether by place marketing specific cities in new areas and/or modifying the spatial division of consumption through enhancing the quality of life for residents, commuters, and visitors” and are complemented by policies targeted towards “refiguring or redefining the urban hierarchy and/or altering the place of a given city within it” (Jessop, 1998, pp. 84–85).

In many contemporary cities, these sorts of attempts at enhancing competitiveness are, with greater or lesser success, wrapped up in attempts to improve amenities and culture, as Florida’s (2000, 2002; Florida and Gates, 2001) work has suggested. This includes, among other things,

the modernization of the infrastructures and assets of urban regions (communications, cultural institutions, higher educational strengths and capacities) to attract investment and visitors and support existing economic activities; and [the formulation of policies addressing] the need to limit further suburbanisation, retain population (particularly middle-to-upper income families) and workplaces and create compact livable cities (Harding, 1995, p. 27, quoted in Jessop, 1998, p. 80).

The elements of a city’s infrastructure, governance structure and culture that are necessary for its rise in the urban hierarchy are, I will suggest, worked out through policy-making processes that combine economic and extra-economic factors. These combinations are frequently articulated in reference to the normative narrative of the ‘good city’ presented by the national media’s best places rankings. In this paper, I will discuss in detail how this process works, using three interrelated case studies.

### **Popular Urban Livability Rankings: The Case of *Money Magazine***

An annual media event in the US is the

publication of *Money magazine’s* “Best Places to Live” ranking. Since 1987, the popular consumer affairs and investment periodical has been compiling annual rankings of approximately 300 cities. The lists are based on an annual survey of approximately 500 of its subscribers. The survey asks the subscribers to think about what criteria they would use if they were choosing a new city in which to live. In this regard, they are asked to rank approximately 40 regional characteristics on a scale of 1 to 10. The magazine takes the results of this survey and compares them with census data for US metropolitan areas. From this, it produces a ranked list of the cities weighted in terms of the preferences of its subscribers. Over the years, this process has produced an interesting geography in which a small number of cities appear quite consistently in the magazine’s top 10 (Figure 1). This spatial distribution is the product of the class and demographic characteristics of the magazine’s readership. In the mid 1990s, the last years in which the magazine published details of those surveyed, the median age of the sample was around 48 and the median household income was approximately \$78 000. These characteristics are reflected, for instance, in the strong presence of the small city of Rochester, Minnesota, in the rankings each year. This is largely due to the location in the city of the Mayo Clinic, a renowned medical facility, and to the heavy weighting *Money’s* subscribers give to available, high-quality health care in their definition of a good place to live.

In 1987, subscribers seemed to desire a city with little property crime, high personal safety and an appreciating housing market, among other factors (*Money Magazine*, 1987, p. 34). Accordingly, Nashua, New Hampshire, Norwalk, Connecticut, and Wheeling, West Virginia, were the top-rated places. The first two were experiencing the effects of economic expansion in certain sectors while Wheeling ranked surprisingly high in the listing due to its low house prices and crime rates. Since then, similar criteria have shaped the ranking (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Top criteria for choosing a city according to *Money*'s recent surveys of its subscribers

1994	1995	1996	1997
1 Low crime rate	Clean water	Low crime rate	Low crime rate
2 Clean water	Clean air	Clean water	Clean water
3 Clean air	Low crime rate	Clean air	Plentiful doctors
4 Plentiful doctors	Plentiful doctors	Plentiful doctors	Clean air
5 Many hospitals	Many hospitals	Many hospitals	Many hospitals
6 Strong state government	Strong state government	Housing appreciation	Good schools
7 Low income taxes	Low income taxes	Good schools	Housing appreciation
8 Low property taxes	Low property taxes	Low property taxes	Low property taxes
9 Housing appreciation	Housing appreciation	Low income taxes	Strong state government
10 Affordable medical care	Good schools	Strong state government	Low income taxes

*Note:* 1997 is the last year in which *Money* published a full list of the criteria. In 1998, it published the top five: clean water, low crime rate, clean air, good schools and low property taxes.

Despite the rather specific nature of *Money*'s ranking criteria (and those of most other similar publications), the cities they identify as the ‘best places’ are represented as *universally* desirable. This process of generalisation takes place through other popular media at the national scale and, to a much greater extent, at the local level as well as through the work of translocal policy consultants and place marketers. Each year, local newspapers and television stations whose city ranks on any list, but especially the major ones like *Money*'s and *Fortune*'s, portray the ranking as an important achievement representing an objective affirmation of the city's high quality of life, its leaders' sound economic development strategy and its significance within the hierarchy of US cities (Table 2).

*Money*'s ranking is also noted by local state agencies and private economic development organisations. These agencies often mention their position on the national ranking when they promote their city to potential investors, residents and visitors. For example, when *Money* (2000, p. 150), conferred ‘best city’ status on Portland, Oregon, the city's mayor said in a press release

We're #1 [*sic*], but of course those of us who live here have always known that. ... I am extremely proud ... [that]

Portland has finally gotten this ‘official seal of recognition’ from one of the nation's leading financial magazines (Katz, 2000).

This reaction is replicated by leaders in high-ranking cities across the country. A page on the Durham, North Carolina, website entitled “Why do business in Durham?” answers the question entirely through references to its high rankings on *Money*'s list and on similar rankings produced by a number of other popular and trade publications (City of Durham, 2001). The city's visitor centre, for its part, has covered two walls with framed copies of issues of *Money* and other magazines in which Durham has ranked highly. On the other hand, a low ranking, while often studiously ignored by local media and élites, can occasionally prompt public consternation and indignation. For example, Flint, Michigan—the city whose economic decline after the closure of a General Motors plant in the 1980s was documented in Michael Moore's film *Roger and Me*—ranked last out of the 300 cities in *Money*'s first list (*Money*, 1987). Local business leaders quickly organised a protest rally at which copies of the magazine were burned by people holding signs proclaiming that “*Money* is the root of all evil” (Moore, 1996). Clearly, those involved in local econ-

**Table 2.** *Money's* best places to live, 1994–97

Rank	1994	1995	1996	1997
1	Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill, NC	Gainesville, FL	Madison, WI	Nashua, NH
2	Rochester, MN	Rochester, MN	Punta Gorda, FL	Rochester, MN
3	Provo and Orem, UT	Jacksonville, FL	Rochester, MN	Monmouth and Ocean Counties, NJ
4	Salt Lake City and Ogden, UT	Seattle, WA	Fort Lauderdale, FL	Punta Gorda, FL
5	San Jose, CA	Ocala, FL	Ann Arbor, MI	Portsmouth, NH
6	Stamford and Norwalk, CT	Fort Lauderdale, FL	Fort Myers, FL	Manchester, NH
7	Gainesville, FL	Salem, NH	Gainesville, FL	Madison, WI
8	Seattle, WA	Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill, NC	Austin, TX	San Jose, CA
9	Sioux Falls, SD	Las Vegas, NV	Seattle, WA	Jacksonville, FL
10	Albuquerque, NM	Naples, FL	Lakeland, FL	Fort Walton Beach, FL

*Note:* 1997 is the last year in which *Money* published straightforward top 10 rankings. Since then, it has identified best places by region and by city size (1998–2000) and by quality of neighbourhoods (2002). In 2001, it devoted its best places feature to a profile of New York.

omic development have come to take the best places rankings produced by the popular media seriously (Pacione, 2001, p. 381). For some, they simply provide another weapon in a larger place marketing strategy while for others, as I will discuss in the following sections, their criteria and the places they anoint as exemplary provide a framework for the development of new policy.

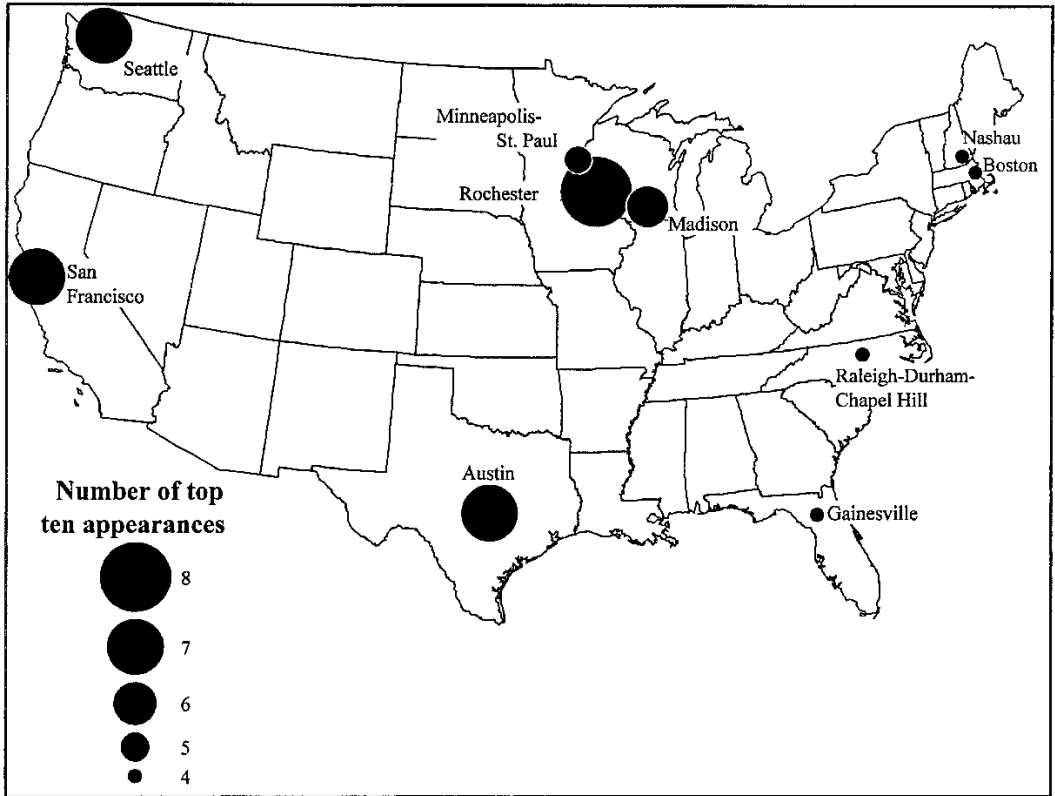
### **The Media's Best Places Criteria Framing Urban Policy**

Central to the entrepreneurial city thesis is the argument that urban entrepreneurialism is accompanied and facilitated by a shift towards governance in which, among other things, the array of policy alternatives for local economic development has grown to include both more direct forms of private-sector involvement and the opportunity for a wider variety of decision-making processes (see K. G. Ward, 2000c; Hubbard *et al.*, 2002 for reviews). Through this shift, certain institutions of the state gain power and legitimacy, others lose out, while groups such as business coalitions and community activist

organisations frequently gain certain powers to create and implement policy. Lexington, Kentucky, underwent significant changes in governance in the 1990s, particularly with regard to how and by whom decisions about the future social and economic development of the city should be made.

In 1994, for instance, Lexington's Chamber of Commerce in collaboration with a private consultant and the financial and political support of the city government initiated a planning process, called New Century Lexington (McCann, 2001; New Century Lexington, 1995a, 1995b). Central to the New Century process was the use of collaborative 'visioning', a decision-making technique characterised by a rhetoric of openness, which is welcoming to direct input of ideas of all interested parties and by a focus on evoking inspirational visions of the future rather than on outlining the concrete policies needed to foster change (McCann, 2001). The aim of the new planning process was to develop a set of goals for how the city should develop, economically, socially and environmentally, in the subsequent decades. This was to act as a framework for the creation of





**Figure 1.** Cities regularly appearing in *Money's* top 10, 1987–2002. *Note:* Since 1987, *Money's* rankings have featured Rochester, Minnesota, eight times—more than any other city. Austin, Texas, San Francisco, California, and Seattle, Washington, have appeared seven times; Madison, Wisconsin, six times; Minneapolis–St Paul, Minnesota, five times; and Boston, Massachusetts, Gainesville, Florida, Nashua, New Hampshire, and Raleigh–Durham–Chapel Hill, North Carolina, have each appeared four times. The 2001 edition is not included in these figures since the magazine decided to forego its normal survey in favour of a feature on New York in the wake of the 11 September attack. It is worth noting that *Money* did briefly laud six other cities in 2001. As the authors put it, “inspired by New York, we went looking for other cities that feature a strong sense of community—as well as low crime, nice weather, low property taxes and excellent education”. These cities were Ann Arbor, Michigan, Austin, Texas, Missoula, Montana, Portland, Oregon, Providence, Rhode Island, and Sarasota, Florida.

future policies in areas as diverse as land use planning, economic development and public education. Elected officials' willingness to accept this privately led process and to pledge to put its recommendations at the centre of future policy processes illustrates the taken-for-granted nature of direct private-sector input into policy in the contemporary US. In the context of the present argument, two aspects of the New Century process are particularly relevant: the question of how to create the best future for the city was understood to revolve around competition with

other places in which standard economic incentives were coupled with the perceived need to offer potential investors 'extra-economic' incentives, particularly high levels of amenity and quality of life; the structure of the decision-making process circumscribed the range of visions of the city's potential future that could be discussed by focusing on certain predetermined criteria and goals. *Money* magazine's rankings figured prominently in both these aspects of the process.

The consultant began the first planning meeting—attended by business and political

leaders, local activists and other residents—by providing a focus for discussion. He argued that, in order to be successful in the future, Lexington needed to identify its competitors, which he defined as a group of 50 similar small and mid-sized Southern and Midwestern cities, and be aware of its relative standing among this group. He emphasised his point by distributing a number of photocopied business reports, crime reports, magazine articles and spreadsheets to the participants, all of which ranked cities in terms of particular attributes or made arguments about why a specific aspect of a place was crucial to its general prosperity. In the rankings, the consultant highlighted Lexington's position in various categories (30th in manufacturing, 21st in services, 5th in education level, 40th in murders and so on). He used these to identify the categories in which the city could do better and the cities listed on the rankings that could be viewed as targets and as examples of how to develop effective policy (author's field notes, 26 April, 1995).

While framing discussion in terms of competition, the New Century consultant also distributed a list of the top criteria *Money* magazine used in compiling its 1992, 1993 and 1994 best places rankings. These, he argued, were key elements that made a city attractive to potential investors and that made it a good place to live for the existing population and for newcomers. The choice of *Money's* criteria is particularly interesting since this publication explicitly defines its 'best places' in terms of their quality of life, including not only their potential for new investors but also their 'extra-economic', social and cultural, characteristics. In this sense, the Chamber of Commerce's project to revision Lexington was, from the outset, intent on developing new combinations of economic and 'extra-economic' factors to increase the city's competitiveness (Jessop, 1997, 1998). It was a self-conscious attempt to improve on the city's traditional methods of attracting industry—which, since the 1950s, had primarily involved assembling land packages and offering tax incentives—

by also deploying Lexington's picturesque surrounding landscape and Southern 'small town ambience' as another marketing tool. Furthermore, the wide scope of the process entailed the capacities of various agencies and institutions dealing with economic and 'extra-economic' factors to be combined in a novel and productive way.

These new combinations necessitated a new form of decision-making in which a disparate group of 'stakeholders' were asked to be involved in planning the vision from its initial stages. As the first visioning meeting went on, participants were asked to identify which criteria they, as a group, considered most important for the city's future. The high-ranking criteria were discussed in more detail with the intention of gaining consensus on relevant policy goals. For instance, "Become one of the top five places of similar population size in the US in terms of earnings per job by 2015" was adopted as a goal (author's field notes, 26 April, 1995). In turn, these goals became the topics of discussion of the subsequent visioning meetings held under the auspices of New Century Lexington and were central to the final 'vision' statement produced by the group (McCann, 2001). This vision was to be turned over to a small group of 'strategic planners' in the Chamber of Commerce who were charged with making specific policy recommendations to the city government and local planners.

The vision was touted as the outcome of an inclusive process in which all views of the city's potential future were considered equally and where consensus-based decision-making created unity of purpose upon which new policies could be built. On the other hand, the vision can be read as a direct reflection of the terms of the debate set at the first planning meeting. The consultant's introductory presentation constituted a discursive framing of Lexington's current economic and social character, its potential future and its position in the US urban hierarchy. This framing defined a playing-field in which the interurban politics of place competition was represented as an indisputable fact.

*Money's* criteria, along with the other data, set the conditions of possibility for the development of a vision of the future of the city.

### **Local Economic Development Strategy and the Ambivalence of Being a 'Best Place'**

The case of Lexington is one example of how the best places rankings and criteria have an affect on how urban policy is formulated. It is a particularly clear case due to the explicit reference to *Money's* criteria and the use of those criteria in setting the limits for discussion. The role of the popular media in the serial reproduction of entrepreneurial policies and landscapes can be traced further, however. The tendency of popular ranking exercises continually to identify the same limited number of cities as best places—to live, to invest, to start a new business, etc.—means that certain places become widely known as exemplars or 'success stories'. In turn, the majority of cities who regularly appear in the mediocre middle of the various rankings identify the anointed few as places to be competed with through imitation. This, in turn, creates a treadmill in which pressure is put back on innovative cities to upgrade continually their quality of life in order to maintain their competitive advantage and to avoid the downward trajectory upon which 'losing' cities can find themselves moving. As Harvey puts it, interurban competition operates as an "'external coercive power' over individual cities to bring them closer into line with the discipline and logic of capitalist development" (Harvey, 1989, p. 10). Thus, cities

have no option, given the coercive laws of competition, except to keep ahead of the game, thus engendering leap-frogging innovations in life-styles, cultural forms, products, and service mixes, even institutional and political forms, if they are to survive. The result is a stimulating if often destructive maelstrom of urban-based cultural, political, production and consumption innovations (Harvey, 1989, p. 12).

Given this context, the rankings not only provide a league table in which cities can see their position relative to their competitors and as a result of which they can set new goals to do better. The rankings also act as a road map for urban political and business leaders intent on gathering information on best practices of economic development. For instance, each year a group of Lexington's city officials and representatives of the Chamber of Commerce hit the road on a fact-finding trip to a different city. Given the discussion in the previous section, it is no surprise that Austin, Texas, and Madison, Wisconsin, another perennial favourite of *Money*, were both destinations for this group in the 1990s (Bean, 1992; Baniak, 1997). Indeed, Austin hosts numerous similar delegations each year, all intent on learning the formula for the city's success and transferring it back to their own city. In this section, I will discuss Austin's economic development model in more detail before turning to its relationship to other cities, using Columbus, Ohio, as an example of a place with an explicit strategy aimed at rising higher in the various best place rankings by emulating Austin.

#### *Narrating Austin's Economic Development: National Media and Local Professionals' Accounts*

*Money* has placed Austin on its top 10 list 8 times since 1991. Recently, the city has also featured highly on a range of other rankings. *Fortune* magazine ranked Austin among its top 10 cities for business 6 times in the 1990s, for instance. The consensus view among these publications is that Austin has achieved both high levels of livability and economic growth, making it a model combination of an ideal hometown and an economic boomtown. As *Money* put it in 1999

Austin has always been graced by its location—nestled in the Texas Hill Country, it has too much rolling terrain, too much in the way of grass and wildflowers, to be mistaken for the flat and dusty Texas of

the imagination. Built around government (the state capitol dome looms over downtown) and education (the state university is the city's largest employer and cultural force), it's both artsy and smart. ...

[In the late 1980s, the] city succeeded in wooing start-up shops and creating a remarkably hospitable business climate. A young UT [University of Texas] student named Michael Dell built a computer company in town that now employs 19,800 and has seen its stock price some 52,000 per cent since its 1988 IPO [initial public offering of stock] ...

But Austin wouldn't make MONEY's Best Places list if it were just a tech boomtown. ... [It also] boasts symphonies, art museums, film festivals, good restaurants and good football as well as some of the best live music in the country. For those looking for safe, clean water, it has that too. So in one sense you could say that they're lucky in Austin (*Money*, 1999, p. 134).

This account can be, and frequently is, challenged on at least two counts. First, as I have already suggested, *Money's* rankings and those of the other major publications, such as *Fortune*, reflect the upper-middle-class characteristics of their subscribers and a generally pro-business and development stance. Their narratives tend, as a result, to paint a rosy view of the 'best places' while generally ignoring the potential negative consequences of economic development on cities and the continued poverty and inequality that exist behind a successful place marketing image. While these concerns are very important, the second challenge to the standard media narrative of Austin's success comes from the local business community and is more directly relevant to my purpose at this point in the paper. *Money's* description of Austin's economic success marks the late 1980s as a turning-point after which the pleasant government and college town blossomed into a high-technology centre. While this is a widely held understanding of the city's econ-

omic development, especially in the national media and among those working in the city's technology sector, those in the city's business community who were engaged in economic development planning prior to the mid 1980s present a different narrative of the city's success. They are particularly concerned with the way the popular understanding of Austin's economic development fails to acknowledge the decades of strategic planning and entrepreneurship that set the stage for the 1990s technology boom. This strategy is based on what was, at the time, a relatively new and innovative combination of what Jessop would refer to as economic and 'extra-economic' factors. Specifically, it entailed the development of strong linkages between key actors and institutions in key economic, political and social sectors while also constructing a vision in which culture and a clean environment would be used as resources to attract clean industry.

The first action, according to this narrative, occurred in 1957 with a University of Texas report recommending that the city attempt to recruit 'light' or 'clean' industry that would complement research and technology initiatives at the university without polluting the city's environment. This formed the basis for strategic efforts over the next 25 years to develop light manufacturing and technology as the third element of the city's economy, along with higher education and government (Engelking, 1996; Gosdin, 2000; interviews with economic development leaders, October and November 2000). This strategy proved successful in creating a branch plant manufacturing economy in the city, anchored by corporations like IBM and Motorola. The process of attracting these companies also solidified a partnership between state government, local business interests and the university which, in 1983, competed successfully with 57 other US cities to attract the city's first major research and development corporation (Engelking, 1996; Gibson and Rogers, 1994).

This success strengthened the tripartite partnership driving the city's economic development. It also indicated that, as the city

became more than a branch plant economy, new strategies needed to be formulated in order to shape future development. A new strategic economic plan was commissioned in the mid 1980s. The plan's title, *Creating an opportunity economy: enhancing quality of life in a changing economy* (SRI International Policy Center, 1985), indicated a continuation of an economic development strategy that linked development and livability. This linkage is underscored in the plan's introduction

If ... Austin is to link economic development with high quality of life, steps need to be taken now to maintain a diverse but balanced economy, to improve education and training for all Austinites, to upgrade the community's physical and environmental infrastructure, and to preserve and add to Austin's social, cultural, and recreational amenities (SRI International Public Policy Center, 1985, p. v).

The 'opportunity economy' model continues to frame economic development policy in the city. It entails a continued attention to maintaining existing socially embedded, or 'extra-economic', factors that shape the city's economic development while also encouraging on-going efforts to further innovate in this context. It also involves a continuing attention to the issues of urban amenity, quality of life and culture as resources in and for economic development. This means that, "in local public policy deliberations, quality of life is a constant consideration, and what constitutes quality of life is a constant subject of debate" (Engelking, 1996, p. 39; ICF Kaiser, 1998).

#### *Austin's Ambivalent Relationship to Best Places Rankings*

Despite the differences in emphasis, *Money's* description of Austin as a good place to live might be read as an affirmation of longstanding economic development policy. The media's tendency to attribute the city's economic success largely to the arrival of a few entrepreneurs in the 1990s and its quality

of life to natural endowments rather than purposeful strategy seems, however, to have created a certain degree of ambivalence among business leaders towards the best places rankings. For one senior member of the Chamber of Commerce

Our economic prosperity is very closely linked with quality of life, so as one does well, so does the other. So, I think being recognised as one of the best places to invest and live is reinforcing. It is encouraging, and we all take, you know, pride and are glad that we're recognised (interview with senior economic development leader, 2000).

In this regard, the Chamber maintains a webpage dedicated to tracking the city's position on various best places rankings (Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, 1999) while city government agencies maintain two others (e-Austin, 2001; City of Austin, 2001). Another member of the Chamber's senior staff was at pains to point out that the city does not court such attention, however.

In fact, we've never ever been focused on how do we make ourselves number one in *Fortune* magazine or *Forbes* or *Money* magazine. ... But what's happened is the media has come to Austin and is asking, "What's Austin's secret recipe for success?". And so we're having a chance to share it with the media and, of course, the media writes more about it. That creates more buzz about Austin, which in turn sends more companies ... (interview with senior economic development leader, 2000).

Austin's ambivalence stems from the view that its economic development priorities—ones that emphasised clean air and water as early as the 1950s and that have continued to stress the interconnections between the economic and the 'extra-economic'—pre-dated and influenced the contemporary consensus on local economic development that is reflected in the pages of *Money* and other publications. This is not to suggest that the attention Austin has received from the na-

tional media in recent years has had no affect on economic development strategy. Rather, business leaders have become increasingly discerning when deciding which types of investment to attract

For companies that just contact us—the 6–800 inquires [annually]—we have a screening criteria and we don't just want anybody now because it's putting more pressure on the infrastructure, so we'll look at their median wage rate—we don't need to attract companies that are going to pay minimum wage. We want to see how socially responsible they are. Will they contribute to solving problems with air quality and water and transport, things of that nature? And then we figure out which ones we really want to help and we encourage those (interview with senior economic development leader, 2000).

Of course, this is a problem most urban growth coalitions would be glad to have. While Austin discourages the advances of interested companies that it finds inappropriate, the cities ranked in the middle and bottom of the popular rankings look to Austin as a model of how to attract investment and residents. The city has become a favourite case study in policy circles (for example, Miller, 1999) and has become a prime destination for fact-finding trips organised by growth coalitions from around the US and beyond, such as the one taken by the group from Lexington (Bean, 1992).

### **Idea(l) Transfer: Learning from the Successful, Chasing the Media Spotlight and the Problems of Implementation**

The ways in which individual cities become widely known as success stories in economic development are numerous. As I have already argued, the role of the popular media in this process should not be underestimated. The rankings produced by mainstream publications like *Money* and *Fortune* construct a hegemonic narrative of what criteria are necessary to rise up the urban hierarchy. This narrative both draws upon and affirms the

policies pursued by a small number of cities. Furthermore, it “consolidate[s] a limited but widely accepted set of diagnoses and prescriptions for the economic and political difficulties [cities face]” (Jessop, 1997, p. 30) by encouraging the majority of cities to learn from and reproduce the policy formulae of the annointed few.

This process of imitation is often seen on the urban landscape. Harvey, for instance, notes that contemporary cities' competitive stance

may even force repetitive and serial reproduction of ‘world trade centers’ or of new cultural and entertainment centers, of waterfront development, of postmodern shopping malls, and the like (Harvey, 1989, p. 10).

There is also a tendency for cities to transfer and reproduce policies from places known for good practices in governance and economic development. A desirable outcome of this transfer would be a careful modification of policy to match the place-specific characteristics of the new location and, as a result, the creation of ‘strong’ or sustainable competitive advantage (Cox, 1995; Jessop, 1998). It is likely, however, that the ‘weak’ and unsustainable serial reproduction of certain landscape elements from city to city under urban entrepreneurialism will be paralleled by the emergence of decontextualised ‘copy-cat’ policies that fail to achieve their long-term economic development goals. In this context, contemporary urban growth coalitions find themselves challenged with balancing their need to learn from best practices while avoiding uncritically copying other cities' policies.

Columbus, Ohio, is a city currently grappling with this dilemma as it attempts to plan its future economic development and, relatedly, to enhance its image at the national level in order to compete for corporate investment. For years, there has been an on-going discussion in the city over how best to distinguish Columbus from the state's other major cities, Cleveland and Cincinnati. This is despite the fact that the local economy has

grown in recent decades whereas the rest of Ohio has suffered the sorts of economic decline commonly associated with the US 'Rustbelt'. In a recent article on how to improve the city, *Columbus Monthly* magazine argued that Columbus needed to "get a better attitude" and "market a national image" (Paprocki, 2001, pp. 36–37). In support of this argument, a local advertising executive argued, "We're endlessly apologizing for not being a place with a pedigree. Let's be confident in who we are—a city on the rise". A city council member struck a similar note saying

How do we escape from being branded as a frumpy, vanilla, no-town town? ... We're America's best kept secret. Let's get a core group of high-profile, forward-thinking Columbus people to lobby for us to the rest of the world (Paprocki, 2001, p. 37).

A concern with Columbus' image and its ability to be economically competitive permeates local business and political institutions. A year before the *Columbus Monthly* article was published, for instance, the Mayor's office and the Chamber of Commerce organised the city's first 'leadership trip', a fact-finding visit to Austin. Despite the similarities between Austin and Columbus in terms of economic history and relationship to education and state government, Columbus has not experienced the same partnership model of urban governance that developed in Austin from the 1950s onwards nor has it experienced the recent economic boom that has fundamentally reshaped Austin. Furthermore, Columbus does not find itself in the upper echelon of many best places rankings and, whereas Austin limits the number of companies seeking to locate there, many in Columbus' business community worry that the relative invisibility of the city means that it is losing out on corporate investment. Austin was chosen as a destination for the leadership trip because of these similarities and crucial differences.

The agenda for the three-day trip included a number of meetings with representatives of

Austin's tripartite leadership coalition—government at the city and state levels, the business community and the university. These were intended to provide the visitors with an understanding of the roles played by each in the city's economic development and of the interactions between the partnership members. Other meetings focused on key aspects of the city's economy, such as the high technology sector, and the policies in place to sustain its development, such as workforce development and venture capital programmes (Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce, 2000a). While the lessons learned from such a trip will vary somewhat from one participant to another, a senior executive in one of Columbus' private economic development institutions identified two areas in which the city could learn from Austin: coalition building for economic development and the creation of a consistent and attractive image.

Reflecting on the visit, this executive argued that "a community needs to have a consensus-driven strategy for the future ... [involving] the critical mass of key leadership ... Austin did that. Austin created within the community a very defined objective [to attract clean, high technology and light manufacturing industry]". On the other hand, he argued, Columbus, "continues to make a mistake [since all of its] plans are either owned by an individual or an organisation. And because they are owned, there was never any broad-based ownership built for these ideas". For him, the visit to Austin not only highlighted the lack of a consensus among Columbus' business and political élites on economic development but also pointed out a parallel and problematic lack of clarity in the city's branding activities

You have a community here of 1.6 million people without the foggiest notion of where they're going. Literally. ... There is no image development. There is no marketing mentality in this community at all. ... You have to be creating brand distinction based on what you are building to. ... It's got to be consistent, consistent

and differentiating enough to ... start to become the brand of the community (interview with senior economic development leader, 2001).

The outcome of the Columbus delegation's visit to Austin is a new regional economic development strategy for greater Columbus that is explicitly "modelled after the strategy that drove much of Austin's success" and to overcome the lack of vision and consensus that senior economic development leaders have recently identified as a major stumbling block for the city (Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce, 2000, 2001). The new strategy focuses on strengthening the "socially constructed, socially regularised and socially embedded [i.e. 'extra-economic'] factors" that Jessop and Sum (2000, p. 2311) argue are crucial to many contemporary economic development strategies. The first step in this new process is the creation of three 'strike forces' intended to take immediate action on key issues of concern: venture capital, place marketing and outreach to corporations. The "Marketing Columbus" strike force was specifically charged with "develop[ing] a strategy to ensure that Columbus is at the top" of *Money's* and other similar lists. Participants in a follow-up meeting after their return from Austin were informed that the

Chamber has already completed an initial analysis of "Best City" Rankings that can be used to jump start this effort. This analysis can be used to drive our strategies—whether they are visits to the editorial boards or their consultants, hosting those groups in Columbus and other marketing activities (Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce, 2000b, p. 2).

Asked how important it was for the city to raise its standing in popular best places rankings, a senior economic development professional argued strongly that it was important for a competitive city.

If you are very competitively oriented, then those kind of things become incredibly important. And I will tell you that

some are more scientifically determined than others. But you have to be out there. You have to have a presence. You have to have a willingness to work at it and understand that you are competing. That's why image starts to take on a very important role. ... And if you want to be moving up on the ladder on these lists, you better be out there talking about yourself, you better be out there with a message about who you are and what you stand for and how that is a sustainable, competitive advantage over other cities who are doing the same. ... [I]f you don't have that ... you get left behind (interview with senior economic development leader, 2001).

Clearly, the trip to Austin had an invigorating effect on many of those who participated. The delegation was presented with a well-rehearsed narrative of Austin's economic development that crystallised existing discomfort with the fragmented nature of governance in the Columbus while presenting the alternative of a coherent partnership between government, the private sector and the university. The presentations in Austin also challenged Columbus to create a stronger and more coherent brand for itself in order to attract investment. Austin's success in this regard and its prominence on national best places rankings has encouraged Columbus to see these rankings as a critical focus of future marketing efforts and to make raising the city's standing on the lists a key component of its new regional strategy.

This renewed vigour notwithstanding, interviews with Austin's economic development leaders around the time of the Columbus delegation's visit suggested that for them, the recipe for competitiveness was not easily transferred. As one long-time member of the coalition that shaped the development of Austin's technology sector put it,

Once a month we'll get a big contingent from different states and communities. And ... the ones that I think can succeed are the ones that are close to really successful universities. So I think Columbus



has a good shot at it because Ohio State is a very good school. But there seems to be need to have a combination of a good university and a nice place to live. And in the last 30 years or so, a nice place to live has included a lot of sunshine. ... So, I think it's difficult for the great universities in the Midwest, but it's not impossible. ... You can't do anything about the climate, so they need to ... plan on recruiting a lot of people who grew up in the Midwest, who think this is a wonderful place to live, and not expect a lot of Californians. ... Every economic development issue cannot mimic Austin (interview with senior economic development leader, 2000).

For their part, local economic development professionals in Columbus are aware of the potential pitfalls of relying too closely on a policy model imported from elsewhere. They also express awareness of the downsides of Austin's economic expansion—not least the congestion and environmental stress—that have accompanied the city's rapid growth. Nonetheless, those involved in the trip to Texas continue to pursue the goal of creating a more coherent combination of economic and extra-economic factors in a policy model that melds a diverse array of powerful interests, similar to that developed in Austin. At the same time, these groups continue to take the criteria of the media's best places rankings seriously and they remain attuned on these rankings as an important focus of marketing exercises in order to make Columbus a permanent fixture on the top of *Money's* and other lists. The success of this effort is yet to be determined but, from Austin's perspective at least, it is far from certain.

### **Conclusion: The Popular Media and the Discursive Construction/Limitation of Possible Urban Futures**

The purpose of this paper has been to explore the linkages among local economic development strategies in US cities, the processes through which these strategies are valorised

and transferred from place to place and the best places rankings produced by the popular media since the 1980s. The paper speaks to two continuing concerns in the literature on interurban competition and urban entrepreneurialism: the question of how and why similar policies are reproduced or transferred from place to place even as cities attempt to distinguish themselves from each other; and, the issue of how 'extra-economic' factors are mobilised in the discursive construction, legitimation and dissemination of ideas about good local economic development policy. The paper argues that the role of the national popular media in these processes has been understudied. I suggest that the media's normative discourse on what makes a place good for life and investment is powerful and political in the way that it aids in the production of contemporary local economic development policy. This argument, then, is influenced by and illustrative of a larger and relatively recent attempt to locate the study of discursive power much more centrally in political economy approaches to urban studies (Jonas and Wilson, 1999b; McCann, 2002; *Urban Studies*, 1999).

This perspective has been clearly argued by Jonas and Wilson (1999b) in their discussion of the politics of urban growth. For them, urban growth coalitions are equally engaged in creating the material conditions for growth and in legitimating their practices through carefully constructed discursive strategies intended to convince people "of the importance of growth to their well-being" (Jonas and Wilson, 1999b, p. 8). These political interventions are largely directed at a popular audience in order to have most effect and to generate maximum support for urban entrepreneurial policies and growth-oriented agendas. This discursive strategy is highlighted by Jessop (1997) whose work on the entrepreneurial city thesis has taken seriously the role of narrative and discourse in the production of the economy and economic space. For him, a key characteristic of the urban entrepreneurialism is the "discursive construction [of the economy] as a distinc-

tive object (of analysis, regulation, governance, conquest, and/or other practices)” (Jessop, 1997, p. 29). Once this economic space has been discursively defined in this way, it can become a key element in the development of what Cox and Mair (1988) referred to as a ‘localist ideology’ which undergirds feelings of commonality and positivity towards growth coalition agendas both within the locality itself and also among friendly agents and institutions working at other scales (Jessop and Sum, 2000).

It is in this context that popular best places rankings become salient to the activities of local business and political élites. This media discourse clearly demarcates one city from another in its ranking process, defines each place as essentially and naturally competitive by placing them on a ‘league table’ and simultaneously draws upon and reinforces a highly problematic view of cities as socially and economically homogeneous by making statements like “you could say that they’re lucky in Austin” (*Money*, 1999, p. 134). The rankings also draw upon and reinforce what might be understood as ‘mainstream’ ideas of what constitutes the good life or well-being and therefore provide a firm foundation for growth discourse. As Jonas and Wilson put it, growth coalitions’ political actions

seek to strike a responsive chord in mainstream thought. ... Thus, power becomes wielded not through contextless articulations that foist power and a new way of seeing on an unsuspecting mainstream but through *cultivating prevailing beliefs and values* (Jonas and Wilson, 1999b, p. 9; emphasis added).

Media narratives of the good life and good places resonate with, concretise and validate prevailing beliefs about how economic development policy should be conducted in many cities. Therefore, they can, in certain cases, have significant impacts on the politics of interurban competition.

The national media’s discursive framing of interurban politics is related to its influence on the character of intraurban politics. As best places rankings have grown in influence

in the past 15 years, it has had an increasing ability to frame policy-making discussions in many US cities. In some cases, local élites first refer directly to common ‘best places’ criteria—such as low tax rates and the importance of sports facilities—and subsequently prioritise these elements in their visions of the future of the place. Therefore, the contemporary local economic goal in the US is to manufacture a city that is simultaneously an ideal hometown and an economic boomtown as imagined in the glossy pages of popular magazines like *Money*. This goal entails the restrictive framing of which visions of the future are acceptable in policy-making discussions.

For example, in the case of Lexington, the development of a vision of the future along the lines of *Money*’s criteria and in accordance with standard discourses of urban competitiveness almost predetermined a final plan that was in line with growth coalition aspirations. The terms of the discussion set by the rankings and statistics produced by the consultant made it very difficult to propose alternative futures. Coupled with this was an unproblematised acceptance of the criteria developed by *Money*. This meant that there was no room to question the definition of, means to achieve or consequences of ‘low taxes’, for instance. After all, the types of criteria used by *Money* and other publications in ranking cities as good places to live tend to be hard to argue with, at least when taken at face value. ‘Safe streets’, ‘vibrant economy’ and ‘high quality of education for our children’ might, in the US context, be termed ‘motherhood and apple pie’ issues. It is hard to suggest that they are *not* good things, but the very fact that that they seem self-evidently desirable for any policy process often makes it very difficult to question the means by which these ends will be achieved.

The danger for urban growth coalitions in believing the hype of the rankings and tailoring policy towards their criteria is that no room will be left in the policy discussion for alternative visions or for stories that do not fit the narrative of prosperity. Cities en-

sconced at the top of the rankings may be more aware of this danger than those pre-occupied with the chase to raise their position in *Money's* next list. For these reasons, the relationships between the popular media's narrative representations of place and the practices of urban governance, policy-making and politics are worthy of continued study. These rankings and the reaction to their publication should be seen as more than entertainment. Their development and use in the policy process can be analysed in the context of the neo-liberal shift towards a view of cities as fundamentally competitive entities and consumption spaces. The crucial question, then, for any policy-making process intent on developing a good place to live in reference to these rankings is, "a good place for whom?"

### Note

1. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for emphasising this aspect of interurban competition.

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