

The Heart Of The City

Heart of the City 2: Location; location; location

All cities exist for a reason, that reason determines the whole shape, structure and character of the city for decades after its construction. It also determines *where* that city will be located. The primary reasons for founding a city are given in the box hereabouts. Each one of these reasons has a profound impact on where the city is. If the population need some where safe where they can raise cattle they are going to have to find a location that is a compromise between the rugged and difficult terrain that is easy to defend and the flat plains that are needed for the production of crops. Similarly a city based on trade is going to have to compromise its security by being in a location that is easily accessible. However the trading city does not require surrounding acres of farmland as its food supplies can be imported. Of course such a city could be brought to its knees if the food caravans stopped arriving.

Reasons for founding a city

- Agriculture
- Defence
- Precedence
- Religion
- Trade

Now naturally the original founders of the real world cities probably did not take such an analytical approach to the founding of their cities. Essentially agriculture created cities, the switch from a nomadic to a settled life required the founding of permanent settlements. The vast food surpluses generated by cultivation compared to nomadic herding created the possibility of trade and occupations other than subsistence farming.

For this reason the first cities were founded in the most fertile land where the potential for crops are greatest. This is why you see the early civilisations arising from the river basins of the Middle East.

Essentially every city requires a steady food supply that can be protected and cultivated by the city's occupants. What the foodstuff is determines where the city will be located. Rice needs water; wheat, sunshine; animals, crops. Once these cities are established though food no longer drives the location of a city. Given enough "regular" food cities the surplus food they create can be used to feed another city that may not actually have any food supply of its own. It is at this point that founding a city for any of the reasons above can occur.

After Agriculture I think cities are mostly built for Trade and Defence, but maybe not in that order. Cities built for Trade tend to come about via evolution, while cities built for Defence are designed from the out with a purpose and goal in mind.

If an Agricultural city is defined by the kind of food it produces then the Defensive City it equally defined by its role. Such cities are often located in places that are hard to reach. By this I do not mean geographically remote or isolated since the Defensive City will often be placed in a strategic location that controls or protects a large sized population. Instead the city must have at least a charge distance worth of obstacles between it and the surrounding land.

Whether this is a steep hillside leading to a plateau, a rocky terrain covered with small boulders or a series of water filled trenches is immaterial. Travelling into the Defensive City is a difficult task, intentionally so. Paths will wind around the defences making leading any caravan a difficult task. In a sense the more secure a Defensive City is the smaller it will have to be since the effort involved in supply food to such a city will be great and the longer it takes the more it will cost when it arrives.

In stark contrast the Trade City would be designed to be as accessible as possible. The Trade City usually has wide streets for carts and animal trains and large flat areas for markets and “stopping areas”.

Where as the Trade City is open due to the greater need for temporary space and the large flux of traffic the Defensive City is usually claustrophobic. Hemmed in by its own defences it cannot expand organically outwards like the Trade City. Its walls or forts create the impression that the citizen is trapped within as much as the threats outside are being kept out.

The Precedence City is something which I thought was a uniquely FRPG phenomena. The Precedence City is one that is built on top of a previous city, usually one that was immensely evil or full of magic. The major reason for the Precedence City seems to be to provide dungeons below the city. However while looking at some Roman ruins recently I realised that there is actually some logic to the Precedence City if not their dungeons. Precedence Cities are actually easier to build than most of their counterparts because the previous city builders have usually levelled the land and there is plenty of building material already present which is free to use. You see this a lot in Britain after the end of the Roman period where Medieval rulers reused the stone from Roman buildings to make their own cathedrals and castles.

In fact in the case of the Romans you can almost make the case for the dungeon as they built a network of sewers under their buildings that were more or less man-sized. Later builders reduced the buildings to ground level but usually used the floor layer as a ready levelled and sunk foundation filling in the remainder with dirt and loose rock. This buried the sunken sewers and furnace rooms (furnace rooms are lower than the room they heat as hot air rises) but did not destroy them.

The Precedence City's location is always driven by the location of the previous city. Usually the preceding city was located for one of the reasons given above, trade is a common one but occasionally agricultural reasons may play a role too. Sometime the original city has suffered a natural mishap: perhaps an earthquake or a volcano (like Pompeii) ruined it. A sudden drying up of the water supply could quickly bring any city to its knees, a drought that last decades may destroy a cities wells, only to have them replenished many decades later when the climate is more favourable and the city population has moved elsewhere. It may simply have become a ghost town due to economic conditions shifting trade routes have left cities abandoned from Venice to Petra (Jordan). With the Romans of course it was a political collapse in a distant

homeland that caused the conquerors to either abandon their cities or slowly become unable to maintain them over the years.

Naturally the Precedence City can only be founded after the event that caused the city to be abandoned in the first place. With this gone though the new city can grow quickly by co-opting any remaining structures and using the rest to fill the land and raise new buildings.

An example of the Precedence City is *Glorantha's* New Pavis, a city that is built on the outside of a great walled city that has been all but levelled within its walls. The remaining defensive walls provide protection while the city is being established and the ruined buildings within in them provide stone and bricks for new barracks and buildings without the cost of having to quarry new materials. New Pavis however is a Trade City, it has been established to protect a trade route and to provide a link between an empire and its new colony lands. Like most Precedence Cities New Pavis has a major motivating force in its creation that is complemented by the location or reputation of its predecessor.

Blacksands, the *Fighting Fantasy* city in the world of Titan, is another Precedence City. Its foundation on the ruins of a former city was based partly on the evil reputation of its predecessor, the superstition and fear of the locals provided a safe-haven for pirates seeking somewhere to hide and recover between raids.

I was particularly thinking of Mecca when I thought of the Religious City although Thebes would be another example and the temple complexes of South America and south-east Asia still others. Jerusalem is an extreme complex example and is worthy of a separate article. The consistent thing about the Religious City is that it is always built on the site of a previous settlement. This confused me at first and I tried to think of counter-examples such as the Islamic and Christian mountain forts that heretic sects fled to. In most of those cases though the settlement was always preceded by an earlier Defensive City.

Then it came to me - religion is essentially a human idea. To become a site of any religious significance the location must be known to humans. Therefore those who raise its status to that of a holy site must previously know the site of the Religious City.

Even when the Religious City is "set apart" from its secular cousin (as with Egypt's Thebes?). It will often be little more than a days travel and more often than not will be a few hours away to allow labourers and menials to attend to and build (as well as repair) it. The other thing that affects the decision of where to found a Religious city is the essentially animist concept of the physical evidence of the presence of the Gods. This can often be a site of unusual (but natural) activity such as hot springs or echoing caves. It can also be as simple as an unusual rock. In more sophisticated belief systems, a stalwart can vouch for the importance of the site. A Prophet can say that the Gods told them to build a city in a given location or a divine vision can be granted at a certain spot. In religions such as Christianity and Islam where there is a certain historical element to the mythology of faith (instead of the purely

spiritual concept of a “God Time” or a pre-historic “Golden Age”) places can acquire a religious value purely by association. Take Bethlehem for example, the value of the site is due to its historical association to an individual. This is almost the reverse of the animist approach of applying a religious explanation to a physical phenomenon. The place becomes a physical testament to a religious phenomenon.

Of course the Religious City concept can also be applied to secular societies. In the modern age nations have often found it necessary to re-locate their administrative capitals and in some cases have built a city to house the national administration. Examples are Brazillia and Bonn both cities that have been created to house a hierarchical governing structure.

Paul Mason mentioned to me that I should keep in mind the “character” of cities when writing about them and I would like to finish by saying that location often determines a great deal about a city’s character before the first inhabitants have even broken the soil. Where would the castle city of *Gormenghast* be without its appalling weather for example? Similarly why do we recognise something about the “personality” of foggy London that is lacking in the perpetual summertime of Miami (and vice versa)?

The Defensive City will always be paranoid, insular and collapsing inwards. Its lack of space and enclosed environment means that it will be many centuries before it can become a teeming metropolis like its counterpart the Trading City. Of course the Trading City with its greater space for expansion can quickly form distinct “quarters” due to ease that people have to change the location of their homes and business premises. The best land will always go to those who have the most resources to purchase it and then develop and build it.

The Religious City always reflects the values of its religion and even when faith falters the lost virtues of the Holy City are as prominent due to their absence as they were for their presence. The same is true for the secular “Religious Cities” except that the virtues they espouse are those that are considered to epitomise the Nation. Of course for those residents who belief in those virtues the Religious City is a Paradise and an example of the Gods presence in the world. Similarly for those who feel isolated from these ideals the Religious City is a sinister place filled with paranoia. The Precedence City is always informed by its past whether looking back in fear or respect. The simply act of recycling the ideas as well as the material of the past ensures that such cities create a strange borderland between the present and history. The architecture is often similar simply due to the fact that the materials have been reused. The people often consider themselves as not just the heirs to the buildings of the past but also the traditions and beliefs of the former residents. This is what the Italian Fascists were trying to do when they rebuilt Roman ruins. In many ways the municipal life of a Precedence City is devoted to trying to reconcile the past with the present and as such they are often some of the most enjoyable to game in.