

Dascher, Kristof

Conference Paper

Function Follows Form

Beiträge zur Jahrestagung des Vereins für Socialpolitik 2015: Ökonomische Entwicklung - Theorie und Politik - Session: Urban Economics II, No. B15-V2

Provided in Cooperation with:

Verein für Socialpolitik / German Economic Association

Suggested Citation: Dascher, Kristof (2015) : Function Follows Form, Beiträge zur Jahrestagung des Vereins für Socialpolitik 2015: Ökonomische Entwicklung - Theorie und Politik - Session: Urban Economics II, No. B15-V2, ZBW - Deutsche Zentralbibliothek für Wirtschaftswissenschaften, Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft

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1 Introduction

There can be no doubt that urban policy molds city shape. Oddly, when commenting on Paris' urban development in the magazine *The New Yorker*, Alexandre Gady, a historian of Paris, appears to suggest the reverse:

“Paris – it’s beautiful. But it’s a doll’s house! And that’s one reason the Parisian élite is so conservative. They live in the doll’s house. . . . The blindness of the élites is to reproduce a model of returning to the center, always back to the center . . .” (as quoted by Gopnik (2014))

Gady argues that city form or shape molds urban policy. This paper’s interest is in the urban political economy of precisely this shape-to-policy connection. We will replace the example of Paris with a monocentric city model, the notion of “doll’s house” with the city’s shape, and the claim of “élites’ blindness” with an unbiased analysis of landlords’ conscious pursuit of their interests. Then we will credit the above quote with containing more than just a grain of truth.

A city’s physical shape places many constraints on urban political equilibrium. These constraints, not all of them obvious, can be brought to light by literally taking snapshots of suitable sections of the city’s shape. These constraints can even be shown to vary with a simple index of the city’s physical form, i.e. the city shape’s skew. A city’s skew puts bounds around resident interests. For example, if city skew is strong (weak) enough then a majority willing to hold on to (to shed) the traditional center is inevitable. In that sense city shape shapes urban policy. Putting fundamental urban policy decisions down to city shape, rather than tracing city shape back to urban policies, is this paper’s theme – even as ultimately we must reckon with a circular relationship between city shape and urban policy.

Incidentally, the idea of reading restrictions on a city’s various political interests off its shape complements a view prominent in architectural theory, originally put forward by Louis Sullivan. According to Sullivan (1896), “. . . it is the pervading law of all things organic and inorganic, . . . that the life is recognizable in its expression”. Among architectural theorists, Sullivan’s theme is known as the “form ever follows function”-view. Our observing the built environment impact on the polity’s decisions instead provides an explanation of how: *function follows form*. I.e., if city shape drives the location of employment and retail, then city form (buildings’ shapes) indeed impacts on city functions (buildings’ retail, office, or residential uses).

In the urban economics literature, analyzing the causality from city policy to city shape has always been a prime concern (e.g. Brueckner (2005), Bento/Franco/Kaffine (2006), Baum-Snow (2006), de Lara et al. (2013) or Ushchev/Thisse/Sloev (2015) more recently). A general analysis of the causality from shape to policy appears to have attracted much less attention – even as specific aspects such as the role of compactness for the viability of urban public transport have been of interest (e.g. Bertaud (2003)). In part this is for



Figure 1: Munich in a 1761 painting by Canaletto

good reason. A young city’s policy is unlikely to be informed by its shape. But for any mature city this seems more difficult to justify. Surely policy adapts much quicker to its surrounding physical structures than these structures do to policy? Once the city has developed its shape – subject not just to early policy but also to numerous other forces of history (e.g. hinterland safety, political institutions, past zoning) and geography (e.g. topography and soil texture) – policy should (also) be expected to follow shape.

Briefly consider the construction of a ring road, and ignore the expense of road construction, the likely staggered development of ring road sites and the remaining cost of travelling that road. On the one hand, such a road must be a strong rival to the traditional Central Business District (CBD). Locations along the ring road connect almost as well to one another as locations in the traditional core do. Ring road locations, moreover, and much unlike those CBD locations, also serve land out of reach prior to the ring road’s construction. Urban policy can clearly remake city shape. On the other hand, city shape surely also feeds into the city’s decision on the ring road. A city characterized by substantial sprawl already, say, is more likely to build that road.

There are many opportunities for applying the paper’s theory. We briefly sketch one of these. The 18th century painter Canaletto was known for his many detailed, even realistic cityscapes of Dresden, Warsaw and London, among others, or for his “vedutas” by art historians’ terminology (e.g. Links (1999), Roeck (2004)). Figure 1, for example, shows Canaletto’s 1761 veduta of Munich. The city silhouette, clearly recognizable in the painting’s background, could carefully be transformed into a historical “commuting distribution”, exploiting the fact that the silhouette is related to how population per unit of land varies with distance to the CBD. When entered into this paper’s theory, this distribution generates policy predictions that could be backtested against the observable policies subsequently taken.

In short, to “see” (an image of) a city may even mean to “understand” that city. While city silhouettes represent an interesting field by itself (e.g. Baranow (1980)), city morphology

may have uses that go beyond the descriptive.

The paper comes in five sections. Section 2 identifies bounds on resident landlord interests with respect to a ring road proposal. This section connects the city’s “physical sphere” with its “political sphere”. Section 3 further “bounds these bounds” by introducing a simple indicator of city shape skew. Section 3 ties the city’s “political sphere” down to its “visual appearance”, and thus details the paper’s central result: Function follows form. Section 4 points to three implications of this paper’s results, addressing the emergence of onion-type sprawl, the potential importance of city shape for climate policy and traffic tolls, and the close relationship between a city’s silhouette and its commuting distribution. Conclusions are found in section 5.

2 The Physical and the Political

The paper’s primitives are few. A circular monocentric city extending \tilde{r} miles out from its center is split into n rings (n even). Rings are spaced equally far apart from each other. Apartments in these rings are inherited from the past, and owned by resident landlords. (Arguably landlords cannot both be influential and absentee.) Each landlord owns (no housing or land other than) two apartments located in any two rings. One of these apartments he occupies himself, the other he rents out to his tenant. In ring i there are l_i landlords, m_i tenants, and s_i apartments.

Reflecting (i) a deficit of information, (ii) the desire to start with a city model that is as general as possible and (iii) the assumption of residents being perfectly mobile within the city, we impose no restriction on the specific rings that landlords and tenants inhabit other than that landlord and tenant numbers in each ring add up, $s_i = l_i + m_i$. Every resident commutes to the city center (CBD) to work and shop. Round trip commuting costs for someone living in ring i are tr_i , with r_i the distance from the CBD to the midpoint between ring i ’s outer and inner annulus. Within-ring travel is costless, an assumption redeemed by shrinking ring width soon.

We equate the city’s shape with its commuting distribution (Arnott/Stiglitz (1981)). So it is true that city shape thus defined is not exactly the same as the city shape or silhouette perceived by a distant observer (e.g. as in Fig. 1). But the relationship is close enough to justify thinking of this silhouette when we speak of the spatial distribution of residents.¹ Reflecting this paper’s interest in the (immediate) effect of shape on policy, we ignore the (delayed) effect of policy on shape that is the dominant concern of the policy-drives-shape literature. For example, there will be no apartment construction. The city is closed, and there is no agricultural hinterland.

If \tilde{r} denotes the city boundary then Ricardian rent at any location $r_j \leq \tilde{r}$, denoted $q(r_j)$, equals the commuting cost savings that that location makes possible vis-à-vis living at the boundary. So $q(r_j) = t(\tilde{r} - r_j)$. Imagine a landlord who resides in ring i himself yet

¹We return to this issue in section 4.

rents out his extra, second property in ring j . This landlord's property portfolio implies a sum of commuting costs and rental income equal to $-tr_i + q(r_j)$. Let ω subsume any other benefit common to all landlords, such as the wage or some local public good that does not distance-decay. Then landlord utility is $\omega + t(\tilde{r} - r_i - r_j)$. Landlord utility is independent of whether the landlord resides in i and his tenant in j , or vice versa, and so we always will conveniently put the landlord into that one of his two properties that suits our exposition best.²

A ring road is proposed to the citizenry that would shift the city's center of attraction from its traditional location (the CBD) out to the urban boundary \tilde{r} (the ring road), in a single instant and with t unchanged.³ Instead of travelling to the center of the city in order to work and shop, every resident now commutes to the city's periphery to work and shop, in those office parks and shopping malls strewn along the ring road that permits its users to circle the city on it at no cost. Vienna is one early and prominent example of a ring road development, with its ring road actually even referred to as the "Ring". In Vienna, "... characteristics of the different parts of the old, inner city were projected into the Ring" (Girouard (1989)).⁴

Tenants will be indifferent to this proposal. Their cost of living, or $tr + q(r)$, remains $t\tilde{r}$. And so it is only landlords who will vote.⁵ Landlord-voters are divided over which decision to take, depending on their specific portfolio location (unknown to us). Generally, instead of commuting r_i all residents living at that distance from the CBD now commute $\tilde{r} - r_i$. Landlord utility becomes $\omega - t(\tilde{r} - r_j - r_i)$ now instead of $\omega + t(\tilde{r} - r_j - r_i)$ before. The change in utility is $2t(r_i + r_j - \tilde{r})$.⁶ This expression is strictly negative if $r_i + r_j < \tilde{r}$ or

$$j < n + 1 - i. \quad (1)$$

Landlords whose property location indices satisfy inequality (1) will oppose the CBD's displacement (landlord opponents); all the other landlords can be counted on to support it (landlord proponents) as soon as indifferent landlords become negligible (which they do soon).⁷

²If – within-city-mobile – tenants are indifferent across locations, so are – within-city-mobile – landlords. Neither do landlords benefit from exchanging their apartment with that of their respective tenant, nor do they benefit from renting an apartment themselves in order to receive rental incomes from both their properties.

³Shifting jobs from the CBD to the city periphery could also take place in a staggered fashion. Rauch (1993) points to the importance of business park developers in coordinating such successive job shifts, while the shopping center industry attests to the importance of retail space developers in coordinating movements in retail (e.g. Brueckner (1993)).

⁴According to Girouard, important city functions (i.e. substantial employment) subsequently moved to the Ring. That's where now one could find "... the new exchange, ..., the university, ... a civic and national government section around the new town hall and parliament house, ... a museums section, ... the opera house", etc.

⁵An alternative (somewhat less convincing, less broadly applicable) motivation for counting landlord votes only comes from pointing to historical cities which let only those cast their vote who paid enough tax. One example is the census vote governing Prussian elections up to 1918.

⁶We have assumed that t always remains the same. If t rose as a by-product of the ring road this would actually further *magnify* landlords' implied utility changes. It would, however, not affect the threshold dividing landlord proponents and opponents. (Of course, tenants would no longer be indifferent because their cost-of-living $t\tilde{r}$ would rise.)

⁷The city is the only one (or at least expects to be the only one) to build its ring road. Then it becomes

Replacing the CBD with a string of shopping districts and office parks along the ring road is one specific, and one radical, urban transport policy scenario. Nonetheless it is meant to speak up for a wider array of urban policies. We could also, for example, have considered a marginal increase in the commuting cost parameter t as brought about by a tax on commuting (possibly even representing a carbon tax), or simply a neglect of radial roads. Suppose that tax revenues are wasted and that tenant interests could be disregarded. Taking the first derivative of the landlord utility introduced above with respect to t gives $\tilde{r} - r_i - r_j$. Thus a landlord votes *for* the tax on commuting precisely if $i + j < n + 1$. But this just repeats the familiar condition (1).

Much as we would like to add up those landlords who oppose, or support, the policy proposal, computing their totals requires prior knowledge of landlord-tenant matches. As emphasized, we do not want to count on having this information. And yet, easily accessible data on ring apartment totals s_i may be used to define lower bounds on, and hence confidence in, landlord opposition to, or support of, the policy (Proposition 1 later). It may be useful to emphasize that the lower bounds constructed below are never meant to be greatest lower bounds. Paying close attention to the details of a – specific – city shape will often permit to compute lower bounds that go further than ours. Even so our lower bounds will turn out to be useful instruments of analysis. This is especially true given that our bounds hold for any – no specific – city shape.

While we cannot derive landlord opposition to the ring road for the given yet unknown landlord portfolios nesting into the city’s shape (“shape-driven portfolios, endogenous opposition”), we *can* derive those landlord portfolios consistent with the exogenous city shape that generate minimum landlord opposition to the ring road (“shape-driven opposition, endogenous portfolios”). Here we first identify those portfolios that give rise to the weakest conceivable opposition for each suitable “snapshot” of the city’s shape. Next we select the very “snapshot” that reveals the largest of all these minimum opposition figures. Then we study the effect changing an index of city shape (i.e. the city’s skewness) has for this largest minimum resistance. And ultimately we look for shapes that are robust enough to withstand (alternatively, incapable of resisting) the ring road proposal’s temptation.

So consider apartments in the first ring, s_1 , first. All of these are tied up in matches that point to landlords who suffer from the ring road – with the exception of those matches involving a tenant in ring n . Put differently, matches involving apartments both in rings $i = 1$ and $j = n$ fail necessary condition (1). Thus s_1 is a good first lower bound on landlord opponents were it not for the fact that every resident in ring n could be tenant to a landlord in ring 1, rather than to a landlord in any of the remaining rings. Making allowance for this observation, really only $(s_1 - s_n)$ apartments may safely be traced back to landlord opponents. Further, these latter $(s_1 - s_n)$ units might ever only involve landlords and tenants from the first ring. So ultimately we can only be certain of a mere $(s_1 - s_n)/2$

open, instead of remaining closed (Brueckner (1987)), attracting immigrants to the new urban quarters developed the ring road. In this model, selling apartments in these newly developed quarters will however not benefit our resident landlords’ incomes because (as we have assumed above) these resident landlords are not the owners of the city’s hinterland.

landlords to oppose the ring road.⁸

Of course, if the city shape is such that $s_1 < s_n$, then $(s_1 - s_n)/2$ is negative. In this specific case $(s_1 - s_n)/2$ is not a very good lower bound. A lower bound of zero landlord opponents is a better, and obvious, alternative choice. Yet this need not bother us too much in view of the fact that there are many other lower bounds on offer. Apartments in the first two rings, $(s_1 + s_2)$, give another conservative estimate of landlord opponents if we allow for (i) $(s_{n-1} + s_n)$ tenants being matched up with some landlord in the first two rings and (ii) all remaining apartments in the first two rings to be matched up with one another. Making these two adjustments points to $((s_1 + s_2) - (s_{n-1} + s_n))/2$ as yet another lower bound.⁹ So already we have identified two “snapshots” of suitable sections of the commuting distribution that both offer some minimum opposition to the ring road consistent with the city’s shape.

This idea can be generalized. Any partial sum $l^o(j) = \sum_{i=1}^j (s_i - s_{n+1-i})/2$, with $j = 1, \dots, n/2$, is a lower bound on the number of landlord opponents. To translate our concepts into the context of arbitrarily small ring width, let $F(r)$ denote the cumulative number of apartments on offer in all rings from the CBD out to r , and let $f(r) = F'(r)$ approximate the number of apartments in ring r . Since everyone commutes from his home, the city’s F in fact represents the distribution of commuting distance. Finally, let $D(r) = (f(r) - f(\tilde{r} - r))$ capture the *ring difference* at r , and set s equal to 1. As city ring width approaches zero, the partial sum including all ring differences up to b tends to

$$l^o(b) = \left[\int_0^b D(r) dr / 2 \right] \quad \text{where} \quad b \in [0, \tilde{r}/2] \quad (2)$$

with the first, as well as last, b rings included. Most of all we are interested in the largest of all these lower bounds. It is that bound that is most successful at extracting information from the given city shape. To identify it, it remains to maximize the integral above with respect to b .¹⁰

Similar reasoning applies towards bounding from below the number of those landlords who are certain to benefit from, and hence *support*, the project. To see this note that all s_n units are tied up in matches that make their owners support the ring road – with the exception of those involving a resident from ring 1. Put differently, reversing the inequality in (1) and setting $i = n$ implies $j > 1$. So to assess minimum conceivable support, suppose that every resident in ring 1 is linked to someone in ring n . In this conservative scenario only $(s_n - s_1)$ apartments really point to landlords who would benefit from the policy proposal. Further, suppose that all of these $(s_n - s_1)$ apartments join landlords and tenants from ring n only. Thus $(s_n - s_1)/2$ is our first lower bound on the number of landlord *proponents*.

⁸It is possible that $(s_1 - s_n)/2$, or some other of the local lower bounds below, exceeds the landlord total, $s/2$. We rule this out by assuming n to be sufficiently large.

⁹Note that by taking away $(s_n + s_{n-1})$ from $(s_1 + s_2)$ we almost certainly overstate the number of landlord proponents and hence understate the number of landlord opponents. Not every match between a landlord in the first two rings and a tenant in the last two rings points to an apartment pair owned by a landlord opponent. Obviously if there are tenants in the second last ring who owe rent to a landlord in the first ring, then corresponding matches do not identify landlord opponents.

¹⁰Obviously our lower bound defined in (2) is zero at least.

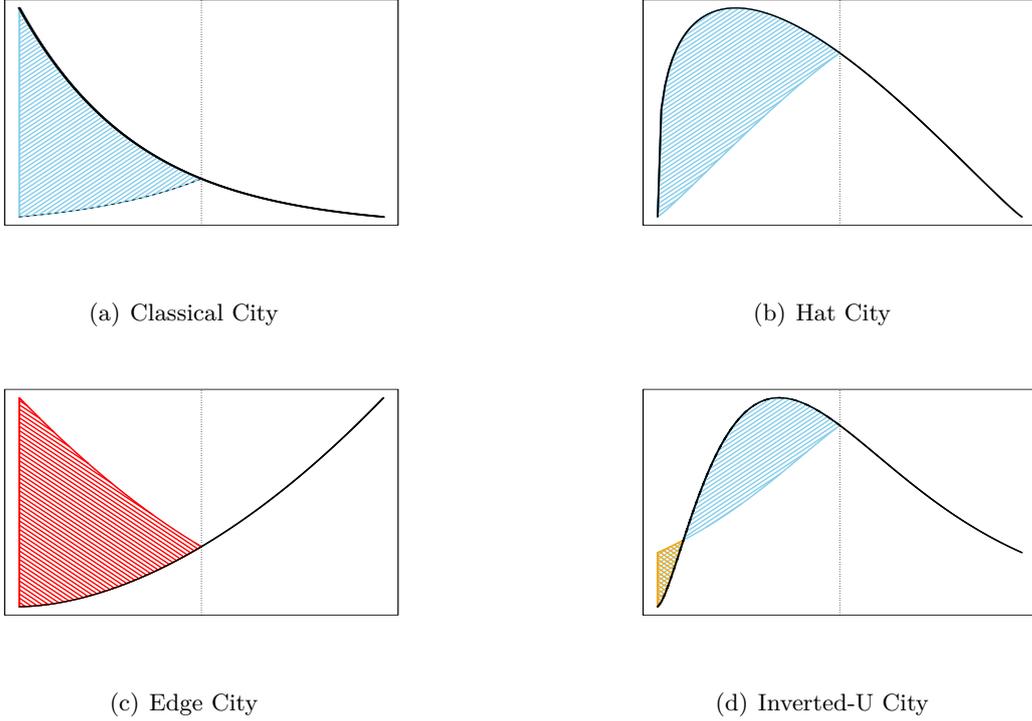


Figure 2: Lower Bounds

Here, too, there are many more lower bounds. For example, another lower bound derives from consulting both the two last and first rings, and comes to $((s_n + s_{n-1}) - (s_1 + s_2))/2$. Generally, if the last, as well as first, j rings are included, the lower bound on landlord proponents can be written as $l^p(j) = \sum_{i=1}^j (s_{n+1-i} - s_i)/2$, where $j = 1, \dots, n/2$. Casting the partial sum of landlord proponents extracted from the first b ring differences in terms of arbitrarily small ring width gives

$$l^p(b) = \left[\int_0^b (-D(r)) dr / 2 \right] \quad \text{with} \quad b \in [0, \tilde{r}/2], \quad (3)$$

or $-l^o(b)$. The largest of all these latter lower bounds is found by maximizing the integral. Equivalently we may minimize this integral's negative, i.e. $l^o(b)$, and proceed with the negative of the minimum value obtained.¹¹

Fig. (2) illustrates the two central concepts introduced. In any of the Figure's panels the horizontal axis gives commuting distance r from the CBD, while the vertical axis gives commuting density $f(r)$. (Axes are not scaled identically across panels.) The vertical line at each panel's center rises up above "midtown" $\tilde{r}/2$, across which the graph of $f(r)$ is reflected (or "folded over") in order to obtain, and illustrate, ring differences $D(r)$ at all distances between 0 and $\tilde{r}/2$. Note how the commuting density is increasing over at least some subset of the support in most panels. In a circular city this easily arises whenever the increase in built-up area from adding yet another ring outweighs the diminishing population per unit of built-up area that is typical of many (though not all) cities.

¹¹Obviously again, our lower bound on landlord proponents defined in (3) can never fall short of zero.

We turn to the stylized city shapes (a) through (c) first. Panel (a) shows what we might dub a “classical city”. With its true distribution documented by de Lara et al. (2013, cf. Fig. 3), Paris quite closely (though not perfectly) resembles this “classical city”. Panel (b) depicts a “hat city” that reflects the fact that the CBD needs land, too. Panel (c) illustrates an “edge city”, across which most commuters travel long distances. – Lower bounds can be inferred from consulting corresponding shaded areas. In panels (a) and (b), the lower bound on opponents amounts to half the shaded area *below* the density’s graph (blue on screen); whereas in panel (c) the lower bound on proponents amounts to half the shaded area *above* the density’s graph (in red). Note that in panels (a) through (c), only ever one of the two lower bounds is active.

Panel (d) adds an “inverted-U city” to our little city morphology. Moscow, for example, appears to exhibit just this shape (Bertaud/Renault (1997), cf. Fig. (1b)). The “inverted-U” city is different from the three preceding stylized city shapes. Neither is one of the two lower bounds zero, nor are lower bounds just as easily read off the shaded areas. In panel (d), and following the principles outlined above, the lower bound on opponents is equivalent to half the area obtained by subtracting the smaller, and doubly, shaded (orange) area from the larger, singly shaded, (blue) one. While early ring differences are negative, later ring differences are overwhelmingly positive. Including those later, and positive, differences in our lower bound (i.e. a cumulative sum) is preferable even if that comes at the cost of also including those earlier, and negative, differences.

Panel (d)’s “inverted-U city” even illustrates the principles underlying our best lower bound on landlord *proponents*. Here this latter lower bound occurs where D vanishes, or where f and its reflection $f(\tilde{r} - r)$ intersect in the Figure.¹² The resulting lower bound is half the cumulative sum of all ring differences from the city center up to the intersection, or half the panel’s doubly shaded (or orange) area above the density’s graph. Generally, we suspect city shapes to be the more informative the more asymmetric they are. A city of symmetric shape, i.e. in which ring differences are zero always, reveals next to nothing of its politics to the observer. (The following section will revisit this idea, replacing asymmetry with skew.)

Proposition 1: (Lower Bounds)

(i) (*Lower Bounds*): Lower bounds on the number of landlord opponents, \underline{l}^o , and on the number of landlord proponents, \underline{l}^p , are identified by

$$\underline{l}^o = \max_{b \in [0, \tilde{r}/2]} \left[\int_0^b D(r) dr / 2 \right] \quad \text{and} \quad \underline{l}^p = - \min_{b \in [0, \tilde{r}/2]} \left[\int_0^b D(r) dr / 2 \right].$$

(ii) (*Upper Bounds*): Opponents’ number l^o is bounded as in $\underline{l}^o \leq l^o \leq 1/2 - \underline{l}^p$; while proponents’ number, l^p , is bounded via $\underline{l}^p \leq l^p \leq 1/2 - \underline{l}^o$.

(iii) (*Sufficient Lower Bounds*): Whatever the underlying portfolio structure, if $\underline{l}^o > 1/4$ (alternatively if $\underline{l}^p > 1/4$) then the ring road project gets shelved (built).

¹²Minimizing $\int_0^b D(r)dr/2$ requires an interior solution, denoted \underline{b}^{**} , to satisfy $f(\underline{b}^{**}) = f(\tilde{r} - \underline{b}^{**})$.

Proposition 1’s Part (i) summarizes our discussion. This proposition emphasizes the impact of the city’s “physical sphere” (differences between housing stocks in juxtaposed rings) on its “political sphere” (lower bounds on landlord opposition or landlord consent) – an impact that appears as secretive and silent as it is fundamental. Part (ii) adds that the lower bound on landlord proponents of the ring road can also be converted into an upper bound on landlord opponents, and vice versa. Intuitively, if at least 30 out of 100 landlords support the ring road, say, then of course at most 70 landlords can be against it. So not only does \underline{l}^p bound the number of proponents l^p from below, also $1/2 - \underline{l}^p$ bounds the number of opponents l^o from *above*.¹³

Most importantly, the ring road proposal is rejected once \underline{l}^o exceeds one fourth of the housing stock, *irrespective* of the city’s specific apartment portfolio assignment (Part (iii)). Figure 2’s panel (a) meets this condition, for example. This panel’s “classical city” pictures a shaded area well in excess of half the area below the commuting density. Here the city *cannot help but* turn down the ring road proposal. Not a single constellation of landlord portfolios exists that could make collapse the anti-ring-road majority that is the inescapable consequence of that city’s shape.¹⁴ Quite apparently the same cannot be said for the “hat city” in Figure 2’s panel (b). Alternatively, of course, if \underline{l}^p exceeds 1/4 then it is the landlord proponents of the ring road who will prevail. Figure 2 provides one example of this, too, with the “edge city” in panel (c).

3 The Political and the Visual

Very different distributions may display similarly sized bounds. It may not so much be the entire distribution that matters to urban majorities but one particular aspect of it. This aspect may even have an intuitive interpretation. This section pursues these two ideas. It suggests that the commuting distribution’s *skewness* is one property that (i) itself bounds lower bounds and (ii) even is visually appealing at that. And so really it is skewness (form) that drives decisions on the ring road proposal (function). Function follows form (Proposition 2 later).

To start us on this idea we first define city skewness σ as

$$\sigma = \int_0^{\tilde{r}/2} D(r) (\tilde{r}/2 - r) dr, \quad (4)$$

i.e. as a weighted sum of ring differences $D(r)$, with a given ring difference’s (positive) weight equal to the two underlying rings’ common distance to “midtown”.¹⁵

¹³Since the interval $[\underline{l}^o, 1/2 - \underline{l}^p]$ contains the true l^o , this interval’s size effectively indicates the precision of our lower bound \underline{l}^o . (A similar point applies to \underline{l}^p .) For city shapes for which this interval is small our lower bound supplies a more precise estimate than for city shapes for which this interval is large.

¹⁴In that sense we now really see why we *do* expect to find the interests of a majority of Parisians (or Parisian landlords at least) to always go “back to the center”, as suggested by the introductory quote.

¹⁵In its reliance on \tilde{r} , the length of the commuting distribution’s support, σ differs from the various definitions of skewness found in the literature. It is possible to rewrite σ as $\int_0^{\tilde{r}} (\tilde{r}/2 - r) dr$, or $\tilde{r}/2 - \rho$, with ρ the expected commuting distance. Thus σ also is midtown distance minus average distance, which is clearly not the same as, say, the traditional non-parametric definition of skewness.

Offering σ we justify by pointing to its visual appeal. In formula (4), early ring differences (associated with distances close to 0) receive large weights while late ring differences (associated with distances close to $\tilde{r}/2$) only benefit from small weights. That an indicator of skewness should reward early ring differences makes sense intuitively. A positive early ring difference, say, is nothing but the “first ring” offering more apartments than the “last”. Yet how the very distant first and last ring compare to each other *frames* our perception of the commuting density’s (i.e. city shape’s) skewness by more than how the two adjacent rings on either side of midtown $\tilde{r}/2$ compare to each other – hence the difference in weights.

Generally, for a city shape to exhibit strong positive skew, two properties contribute. First, ring differences should more often than not be positive (true for our stylized “classical city”, “hat city” and “inverted-U-city” (Figure 2 again), but not true in the case of our “edge city”). And second, these positive ring differences should occur early (close to the CBD), rather than late (close to the city’s boundary). The “inverted-U city” displays visibly smaller skew than our “hat city” precisely because it lacks those early positive ring differences.¹⁶ To summarize, all of this points to σ ’s visual merit.

At the same time, and as the paper’s key proposition, σ also allows us to bound city politics. City skewness connects the visual with the political, by exploiting both concepts’ connection with the physical. A compact statement of this idea runs through the following short sequence of inequalities:

$$\sigma = \int_0^{\tilde{r}/2} D(r) (\tilde{r}/2 - r) dr \leq \max_{b \in [0, \tilde{r}/2]} \left[\int_0^b D(r) (\tilde{r}/2 - r) dr \right] \quad (5)$$

$$\leq \max_{b \in [0, \tilde{r}/2]} \left[\int_0^b D(r) (\tilde{r}/2) dr \right] \quad (6)$$

$$= \tilde{r} \max_{b \in [0, \tilde{r}/2]} \left[\int_0^b D(r) dr / 2 \right] = \tilde{r} \underline{l}^o, \quad (7)$$

Inequality (5) exploits the fact that the integral over weighted ring differences is greatest if the integral’s upper limit is chosen freely, rather than being invariably fixed at $\tilde{r}/2$. And equation (7) makes use of the fact that a monotonic transform of the maximand does not affect the maximization procedure’s solution. This leaves us with inequality (6). Note that any further information absent, ring differences $D(r)$ cannot be signed. A ring difference may be anything: positive, zero, or even negative. So replacing $(\tilde{r}/2 - r)$ by $\tilde{r}/2$, as we do when going from the r.h.s. of (5) to the r.h.s. of (6), not necessarily increases the integral.

And yet increase is precisely what that integral does. As the proof of Proposition 2 in the Appendix shows, inequality (6) is true indeed. Its proof really relies on one single important insight. By definition, the upper limit of the integral b is chosen to render the

¹⁶Additional shapes could be drawn to illustrate how σ conforms with our intuition on skewness. Symmetric distributions, for instance, are characterized by skewness being equal to zero (as they should be). For symmetric distributions, ring differences are all zero and hence so is skewness.

expression in square brackets on the r.h.s. of (5) as large as possible. Let r^* denote this maximizer. In the resulting integral, or in

$$\int_0^{r^*} D(r) (\tilde{r}/2 - r) dr, \quad (8)$$

ring differences may well alternate in sign, but *late* ring differences at distances just short of r^* must be positive. Why else would they be included in the integral (8)? Yet these late, and positive, ring differences close to r^* are also those where replacing $(\tilde{r}/2 - r)$ with \tilde{r} has the greatest impact. After all the change in weight applied when going from the r.h.s. of (5) to the r.h.s. of (6) is r , and hence is largest if r is close to r^* .

Intuitively then, positive ring differences come to enjoy a greater extra in weight than negative ring differences do. On balance replacing weights serves to increase the overall sum. The formal proof in the Appendix then generalizes this intuitive idea to city shapes for which ring differences' sign alternates more often than just once (i.e. finitely many times). To summarize, replacing $(\tilde{r}/2 - r)$ by $\tilde{r}/2$ *does* contribute to raising the r.h.s. of (5), and inequality (6) *is* true.

We summarize the overall inequality implied by the succession of inequalities (5) through (7), and combine it with $\underline{l}^o \leq l^o$ (Proposition 1), in Proposition 2's first part. Landlord support for the ring road proposal is bound from below by skew adjusted for city size, σ/\tilde{r} . Part (i)'s second inequality gives an independent, if related, result. The negative of adjusted city skew bounds landlord proponents from below. The more skewed the city is the more confident we are of the ring road proposal meeting landlord resistance. In sufficiently positively skewed cities (Figure 2's panel (a), (b) and (d)), part (i)'s first inequality may be useful. In sufficiently negatively skewed cities (Figure 2's panel (c)) we exploit the second inequality instead.

Proving Proposition 2's second inequality relies on a sequence of inequalities akin to that in (5) through (7). Compactly stated,

$$\sigma = \int_0^{\tilde{r}/2} D(r) (\tilde{r}/2 - r) dr \geq \min_{b \in [0, \tilde{r}/2]} \left[\int_0^b D(r) (\tilde{r}/2 - r) dr \right] \quad (9)$$

$$\geq \min_{b \in [0, \tilde{r}/2]} \left[\int_0^b D(r) (\tilde{r}/2) dr \right] \quad (10)$$

$$= -\tilde{r} \max_{b \in [0, \tilde{r}/2]} \left[\int_0^b (-D(r)) dr / 2 \right] = -\tilde{r} \underline{l}^p. \quad (11)$$

Here steps (9) and (11) are obvious again. It is inequality (10) that plays the crucial, and not-so-intuitive, part. Much as above, moving from the r.h.s. of (9) to the r.h.s. of (10) is not trivial because $D(r)$ again cannot be signed. It is possible to prove that inequality (10) holds nonetheless. To summarize then, $\sigma \geq -\tilde{r} \underline{l}^p$. Rearranging this inequality and combining it with $\underline{l}^p \leq l^p$ (Proposition 1, Part (i)) yields the $-\sigma/\tilde{r} \leq l^p$ also stated in the Proposition's Part (i). The formal proof we skip, it is similar to that given for the corresponding inequality for landlord opponents.

Proposition 2’s Part (ii), in setting out the relationship between city shape (city form) and buildings’ uses (city function), contains the paper’s comparative statics. On the one hand, if σ/\tilde{r} exceeds $1/4$ then this is not just true for l^o (Proposition 2, Part (i)) but *a fortiori* also for l^p . On the other hand, if $-\sigma/\tilde{r}$ exceeds $1/4$ then so does l^p (Proposition 1, Part (i)). Buildings in the city traditionally house retail and office uses. If city skew is strong enough then traditional uses are preserved, while if city skew is sufficiently negative then uses are reversed, i.e. city center buildings become residential and it becomes peripheral buildings’ turn to take over the retail and office function. Of course, for “amorph cities”, with σ/\tilde{r} in the open interval $(-1/4, 1/4)$, equilibrium policy cannot be assessed further information absent. And so the relationship between σ and the electorate’s policy decision cannot really be said to be monotonic.

Proposition 2: (Function Follows Form)

(i) *(Physical and Visual): City Skew σ bounds landlord opponents and proponents via*

$$\sigma/\tilde{r} \leq l^o \qquad \text{and} \qquad -\sigma/\tilde{r} \leq l^p.$$

(ii) *(Function Follows Form): If $\sigma/\tilde{r} > 1/4$ (or $-\sigma/\tilde{r} > 1/4$ alternatively) the center retains its retail and employment function (the periphery takes over jobs and shops), irrespective of the city’s apartment ownership structure.*

From that perspective, the impact of city shape on city functions presented here reverses – or, less dogmatically, complements – Sullivan (1896)’s “form follows function”. To emphasize, all of this is always true in full ignorance of the city’s actual apartment portfolio assignment.¹⁷

4 Discussion

Sprawl: As indicated in the introduction, ultimately urban policy will feed back into city shape. Not just should the city’s shape be expected to impact on urban policy (this paper’s overall proposition); also the city’s shape naturally responds to urban policy (a well-established fact). Cities that are sufficiently skewed stick to their traditional center. Inasmuch as the existing distribution of apartments across the city already reflects the center’s past attraction, nothing ever changes. A city with sufficiently positive skew is in perfect equilibrium. Both the city shape and its electorate’s rejection of any ring road proposal constantly reaffirm each other, and hence persist into the future.

In great contrast, cities that are sufficiently skewed towards the center are obviously not in any equilibrium. As argued above, a city with strong negative skew first sheds its

¹⁷An obvious and important follow-up question is how our results change if apartment ownership is relaxed. This question is left to an extension of this paper’s model. Nonetheless even now we surmise that if the city is heavily skewed, relaxing apartment assignments will not overturn the result that city skewness predicts the ring road proposal’s fate. This is fairly obvious if we think about two extreme alternatives, where either all landlords jointly act as a landlord class or where all residents are owner-occupiers. In both of these scenarios city skewness again can help predict equilibrium policy.

traditional center. From a dynamic perspective, and after adding a city shape response at long last, the implied decentralization of employment and shopping opens up a host of new property developments beyond the ring road, on land that was out of reach previously (the city’s “suburb”). This land must appear attractive also to the mobile of other cities’ residents. Apartment construction beyond the ring road will make the settlement area expand far beyond its initial boundary (the city’s “core”).

The city’s ultimate path of growth depends on a number of decisions also addressed by a large and growing literature, e.g.: Will the suburbs be incorporated into the core, to the extent of creating an agglomeration containing both suburbs and core? Will owners of suburb land be residents of that agglomeration? How do the other cities in the urban system respond, will they also shed their traditional CBD? Briefly, how the shape of the agglomeration evolves depends on the answers to all of these questions. The agglomeration’s shape may be much more skewed than the city’s shape ever was. Then the agglomeration settles into an equilibrium.

Just as conceivably, adding all this suburb population joint with shedding city core population may actually reinforce the initial city’s negative skew. The evolving agglomeration may exhibit sufficiently negative skew, too, much like the old city core did earlier. Then the agglomeration cannot help but build its own, and hence yet another, ring road. Much like the layers of an onion, the evolving agglomeration keeps adding ring roads and suburbs, while at the same time hollowing out further in the center. This may stop when ring road travel starts becoming expensive. We delegate a fuller analysis of such a mutual interaction between shape and policy, joint with its response to exogenous shocks, to a later paper.

Vedutas: We have followed Arnott/Stiglitz (1981) in equating city shape with the city’s commuting distribution. Arguably this city shape is not what a distant observer – of Munich in 1761 (Fig. 1), say – actually *sees*. In any case there is a tight relationship between shape and silhouette (Brueckner (1987)). Let $h(r)$ denote floor space per unit of land, and let $y(r)$ denote a household’s housing consumption. Then $h(r)/y(r)$ gives population per unit of land built on. Further, if $a(r)$ captures the built up area then the apartment supply – and the commuter total – at that distance is $h(r)a(r)/y(r)$ approximately. So

$$f(r) = h(r) a(r) / y(r)$$

provides a “foundation” for the paper’s commuting density. Becoming informed of, or making reasonable assumptions on, $a(r)$ and $y(r)$ allows one to go back and forth between silhouette $h(r)$ and shape $f(r)$.

To revisit the introduction’s veduta example (Fig. 1), suppose Munich’s silhouette $h(r)$ were fitted a straight line $h(r) = d(\tilde{r} - r)$, with \tilde{r} and d known scalars derived from the painting. (Canaletto is known for both his realism as well as his employing the at the time novel, and more precise, “camera obscura” technique, painting a projection of the cityscape onto a wall rather than the cityscape itself.) If $y(r)$ could safely be assumed to equal some constant c , and if $a(r)$ just equalled $2\pi r$ then Munich’s commuting density

would be $f(r) = 2\pi r(d/c)(\tilde{r}-r)$. For each city painting we may compute adjusted skewness σ/\tilde{r} , to then compare it with threshold 1/4 and subsequent city history.

Carbon Tax or Congestion Toll: We have pointed to the analogy between the electorate’s decision on the ring road proposal and its decision on whether to introduce a tax on commuting (motivated by aiming to reduce congestion or carbon dioxide emissions), raising t marginally. If the attendant tax revenue can be ignored (e.g. because it is wasted) and if tenants’ political influence can be neglected (even as tenants’ costs-of-living $t\tilde{r}$ rise) then a city that is *against* the ring road also is a city that is *for* implementing a city toll or a carbon tax. This attributes societies composed of cities of sufficient skew the political majority in favor of the carbon tax. abatement

5 Conclusions

Urban policy molds city shape. This paper argues that city shape also molds urban policy. The more skewed a city’s shape (i.e. commuting distribution), the less conceivable a majority of resident landlords that prefer replacing the traditional center at the CBD by a succession of office parks and shopping malls strewn along a city ring road. This idea connects to two long-standing themes in both architectural theory and economics. It connects to architectural theory because it provides one specific instance of where “function follows form”, rather than where “form follows function” (Sullivan (1896)). As one particular architect subsequently notes himself,

“Form follows function – that has been misunderstood. . . . Form and function should be one, joined in a spiritual union.” (Frank Lloyd Wright quoted in Saarinen (1954))

And this idea of city shape molding urban policy also connects to economics because it gives one specific instance of when drawing conclusions from an aggregate (the city form) to its component members (the city residents) is legitimate. Economics as a field has traditionally been weary of generalizing an aggregate’s properties on towards the aggregate’s component members lest it commit a “fallacy of division”. By linking the built environment – a society aggregate – to the preferences of (at least a majority) of its inhabitants – a majority of individuals – we also provide an example at least of where inferring dominant residents’ properties does seem justified. Whenever the city’s shape “leans towards” the city center (a majority of) resident landlords also are inclined to maintain, and hence “lean towards”, the city center. Conversely, if the city “leans towards” the periphery (a majority of) resident landlords are inclined to develop, and hence “lean towards”, the periphery. For once no fallacy is involved.

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7 Appendix

Proof of Proposition 1:

Part (i) (Lower Bounds): Consider a landlord who resides in ring i yet rents out the extra property in ring j . This is a “match” $\{i, j\}$. Let matrix B collect the frequencies with which matches $\{i, j\}$ occur. For example, $b_{1,3}$ is the number of times a landlord owning, and living in, an apartment in the first ring also owns an apartment in ring 3. Note that, with this definition, the sum of all entries in row i plus the sum of all entries in column i just yield the apartment total in ring i .

$$B = \begin{pmatrix} b_{1,1} & b_{1,2} & b_{1,3} & \cdots & b_{1,n-2} & b_{1,n-1} & b_{1,n} \\ b_{2,1} & b_{2,2} & b_{2,3} & \cdots & b_{2,n-2} & b_{2,n-1} & b_{2,n} \\ \vdots & \vdots & \vdots & & \vdots & \vdots & \vdots \\ b_{n-1,1} & b_{n-1,2} & b_{n-1,3} & \cdots & b_{n-1,n-2} & b_{n-1,n-1} & b_{n-1,n} \\ b_{n,1} & b_{n,2} & b_{n,3} & \cdots & b_{n,n-2} & b_{n,n-1} & b_{n,n} \end{pmatrix}. \quad (12)$$

In view of condition (1), B 's counter diagonal (comprising all the elements on the diagonal stretching from the bottom left corner to the top right hand corner) collects all those matches that leave landlords indifferent to the ring road. In contrast, entries above (below) B 's counterdiagonal collect all those matches that involve landlord opponents (landlord proponents).

Since $(s_1 - s_2)/2$ is an obvious first lower bound, let us make precise the second lower bound discussed in the main text instead, or $(s_1 + s_2 - (s_{n-1} + s_n))/2$. In (12), s_1 and s_2 are the sums of all entries given in the first row and column and second row and column, respectively. It is clear that this sum overstates the number of landlord opponents; some of its elements are found on, or below, our counterdiagonal. The implied error amounts to

$$(b_{n,1} + b_{n-1,2} + b_{n,2}) + (b_{1,n} + b_{2,n-1} + b_{2,n}). \quad (13)$$

This error collects a subset of all the matches linking apartments in the last two rings to apartments in the first two rings, indicating landlords that do not oppose the ring road at all. We take care of these by subtracting *all* apartments in the last two rings from $(s_1 + s_2)$. Similar reasoning applies to subsequent lower bounds on landlord opponents, or to any lower bound on landlord proponents. \square

Proof of Proposition 2:

Part (i) (Physical and Visual/First Inequality): It remains to show that the following inequality is true:

$$\max_{b \in [0, \tilde{r}/2]} \left[\int_0^b D(r) (\tilde{r}/2 - r) dr \right] \leq \max_{b \in [0, \tilde{r}/2]} \left[\int_0^b D(r) (\tilde{r}/2) dr \right] \quad (14)$$

The proof proceeds in three steps.

Step 1: Let r^* denote the maximizer to the program on the l.h.s. of (20). If ring differences are positive always then there is nothing to prove. Thus suppose that the signs

of ring differences $D(r)$ alternate on $[0, r^*]$. By definition of r^* , the last interval must be one on which $D(r) > 0$ because if this were not true then r^* would not be a maximizer: An upper limit of integration short of r^* would perform better.

Consider all those intervals on which $D(r)$ retains its sign. We pair off these intervals into groups of two each. That is, we divide $[0, r^*]$ into n consecutive intervals $[0, r_1^*], [r_1^*, r_2^*], \dots, [r_{n-1}^*, r^*]$ such that the i -th such interval decomposes into one subset on which $D(r) < 0$, ranging from $[r_{i-1}^*, \hat{r}_i]$, and another on which $D(r) > 0$, written $[\hat{r}_i, r_i^*]$. We also set $r_0^* = 0$ and $r_n^* = r^*$.

By the second mean value theorem of integration, there must be numbers c'_i and c''_i , satisfying $\tilde{r}/2 \geq c'_i \geq c''_i > 0$ as well as $c''_i \geq c'_{i+1}$ for all i , such that

$$\begin{aligned}
\max_{b \in [0, \tilde{r}/2]} \left[\int_0^b D(r) (\tilde{r}/2 - r) dr \right] &= \sum_{i=1}^n \left[\int_{r_{i-1}^*}^{\hat{r}_i} D(r) (\tilde{r}/2 - r) dr + \int_{\hat{r}_i}^{r_i^*} D(r) (\tilde{r}/2 - r) dr \right] \\
&= \sum_{i=1}^n \left[c'_i \int_{r_{i-1}^*}^{\hat{r}_i} D(r) dr + c''_i \int_{\hat{r}_i}^{r_i^*} D(r) dr \right] \\
&\leq \sum_{i=1}^n \left[c'_i \int_{r_{i-1}^*}^{\hat{r}_i} D(r) dr + c'_i \int_{\hat{r}_i}^{r_i^*} D(r) dr \right] \\
&= \sum_{i=1}^n c'_i \int_{r_{i-1}^*}^{r_i^*} D(r) dr. \tag{15}
\end{aligned}$$

Step 2: This intermediate step proves that for all $j = 1, \dots, n$, we have

$$\int_{r_{n-j}^*}^{r^*} D(r) dr \geq 0. \tag{16}$$

Note first that the last, n -th, integral in the sum on the right hand side of (15) must be non-negative because if it were not then r^* could never be a solution to the program on the l.h.s. of (20): Picking a smaller upper limit than r^* , and hence omitting that last term, would be a better choice. So by necessity $\int_{r_{n-1}^*}^{r^*} D(r) dr \geq 0$.

Now, when added up the last two terms in the sum on the r.h.s. of (15) must be non-negative, too, because, again, otherwise r^* could not be optimal. But then, since $c'_n \leq c'_{n-1}$ and in view of the previous paragraph's inequality, we even have

$$\begin{aligned}
0 &\leq c'_{n-1} \int_{r_{n-2}^*}^{r_{n-1}^*} D(r) dr + c'_n \int_{r_{n-1}^*}^{r^*} D(r) dr \\
&\leq c'_{n-1} \int_{r_{n-2}^*}^{r_{n-1}^*} D(r) dr + c'_{n-1} \int_{r_{n-1}^*}^{r^*} D(r) dr \\
&= c'_{n-1} \int_{r_{n-2}^*}^{r^*} D(r) dr \tag{17}
\end{aligned}$$

Since c'_{n-1} is positive the integral on the r.h.s. of (17) is non-negative. Repeating this type of argument shows that any sum of the last j integrals in the grand sum on the r.h.s. of (15) is non-negative. This proves (16). (The informal argument presented in this step can be transformed into a proper proof of induction. To avoid introducing extra notation this is not done here.)

Step 3: Result (16) permits us to take the sum in (15) further. We continue with the expression on the r.h.s. of (15) as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}
\sum_{i=1}^n c'_i \int_{r_{i-1}^*}^{r_i^*} D(r) dr &= \sum_{i=1}^{n-1} c'_i \int_{r_{i-1}^*}^{r_i^*} D(r) dr + c'_n \int_{r_{n-1}^*}^{r^*} D(r) dr \\
&\leq \sum_{i=1}^{n-1} c'_i \int_{r_{i-1}^*}^{r_i^*} D(r) dr + c'_{n-1} \int_{r_{n-1}^*}^{r^*} D(r) dr \\
&= \sum_{i=1}^{n-2} c'_i \int_{r_{i-1}^*}^{r_i^*} D(r) dr + c'_{n-1} \sum_{i=n-1}^n \int_{r_{i-1}^*}^{r_i^*} D(r) dr \\
&\leq \sum_{i=1}^{n-3} c'_i \int_{r_{i-1}^*}^{r_i^*} D(r) dr + c'_{n-2} \sum_{i=n-2}^n \int_{r_{i-1}^*}^{r_i^*} D(r) dr \\
&\leq \dots \\
&\leq \sum_{i=1}^n c_1 \int_{r_{i-1}^*}^{r_i^*} D(r) dr
\end{aligned} \tag{18}$$

Note how successive inequalities repeatedly exploit (16), for increasingly larger values of j . We only need to add that

$$\begin{aligned}
\sum_{i=1}^n c_1 \int_{r_{i-1}^*}^{r_i^*} D(r) dr &\leq \sum_{i=1}^n (\tilde{r}/2) \int_{r_{i-1}^*}^{r_i^*} D(r) dr \\
&= \int_0^{r^*} D(r) (\tilde{r}/2) dr \\
&\leq \max_{b \in [0, \tilde{r}/2]} \left[\int_0^b D(r) (\tilde{r}/2) dr \right]
\end{aligned} \tag{19}$$

Putting inequalities (15), (18) and (19) together completes the proof. \square

Part (i) (Physical and Visual/Second Inequality): It remains to show that the following inequality is also true:

$$\min_{b \in [0, \tilde{r}/2]} \left[\int_0^b D(r) (\tilde{r}/2 - r) dr \right] \geq \min_{b \in [0, \tilde{r}/2]} \left[\int_0^b D(r) (\tilde{r}/2) dr \right]. \tag{20}$$

The proof is similar to that given for Part (i)'s first inequality. \square