Cities in the modern world are beginning to share some features with the city-states of millennia past. Now, as then, cities are important, even critical, to economic development. Unlike the walled cities that harbored flourishing trade in medieval Europe, today, cities by the thousands all around the world are looking outward in search not of silk and spices, but rather sources of finance, global talent, and most of all, good ideas. But the search for knowledge isn’t always easy.

A few weeks ago, my colleague Neal Peirce chided the short-sighted carping of voters who see in mayoral travel only junkets, even if they are for purposes of study. My recent research for a forthcoming book shows that the 500 largest cities on the planet travel often, on the order of thousands of study visits annually, and they visit a wide range of host cities which are selected carefully, so that visitors can acquire valuable knowledge to speed up improvements back home.

Not only for the rich

A survey of 50 large cities around the world revealed that cities visit repeatedly and continuously every year, often more than 10 times per year. They tend to choose visit partners that are like themselves, the rich tend to visit the rich, Stockholm visits London, London visits New York. But the poor—cities like Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; Dakar, Senegal; and Tabriz, Iran—visit rich and poor in equal shares. And though visitors often select similar-sized hosts, even the megacities more frequently visit their cousins in the one to five million population range than their sister megacities. Perhaps something about that moderate city size enables newcomers to get their arms around the whole thing in a short time.

Smart cities

They go because in a globalized economy, cities need to work harder to make a living. They no longer have the protections of trade regimes and the comforts of regional isolation. In today’s world, money moves fast, even faster than trade deals, and cities have learned that they must keep up with their principal competitors—other cities. If they want those inward investments, cities must strive to be on top of their game. They have to make an attractive place for global talent and to deliver well-connected and efficiently functioning infrastructure.

Why do they go?

But also, city leaders go because they have short terms of office and they know that learning from others is cheaper and less risky than pursuing untested ideas that may end up in false starts. Good practices from successful cities offer shortcuts. Cape Town and Buenos Aires drew on the waterfront renewal experience of Baltimore and London. Da Nang took lessons from Japan in conversion and regulation of urban land. Regional centers in Rajasthan in the north of India are following lessons of infrastructure expansion and business readiness that their peer cities developed in central and southern India. Amman, Jordan is studying the many experiments in decentralized governance from other parts of the world, even outside the Middle East. City-to-city exchange was ranked by survey takers as by far the most effective way to learn. Visitors can actually see how things work.

What do they learn?

Half of the cities taking part in the survey were reformers (by their own reckoning, they have made “many significant reforms”), and they have distinct interests compared to other cities. Reformers showed most interest in transport and know-how in fostering local economic development. The search for transport solutions reflects the well-known spread
of Curitiba’s bus rapid transit (BRT) system to other cities in Brazil, then to Bogota, Colombia, and on to Mexico City. Currently BRT is reaching Asia. It is also why dozens of other cities, Portland is a good example, visit Amsterdam and Copenhagen: visitors see demonstrated in those northern European cities the power of integrating all forms of movement—walking, bicycles, automobiles, busses, and trams—into a single transit system.

The nonreformers in the survey are those that had made few or no reforms. Their priorities were spread more or less evenly across a spectrum of topics, including finance, urban planning, urban renewal, and basic utilities. Perhaps the reformers feel they had this ground already covered. Both reformers and nonreformers are concerned with the big and growing question for all cities on the planet: how to govern sprawling metropolitan areas. Cities on the prowl for answers to the metro puzzle are unlikely to return home fully satisfied.

GREAT IDEA! NOW WHAT?

ACQUIRING NEW KNOWLEDGE is only half the battle. How the knowledge is validated and applied to problems back home is a whole other drama. Our research has also discovered individual styles in the way cities handle new knowledge.

Trust and a learning environment seem to be the main ingredients in the alchemy of internal processing that is needed in a city to adapt knowledge successfully to local circumstances. Seattle’s Trade Development Alliance (TDA) has developed this understanding and internalized the practice of relationship building into its study tours. The TDA involves a range of business, government, and independent leaders in each and every mission. Over nearly 20 years of missions and many repeat participants, the TDA has achieved a measurable degree of bonding among its civic leadership.

LEADERS INTERVIEWED in a half dozen cities over the past 18 months also point to trust and bonding. These are the key elements in adapting “imported” knowledge to solve problems. Even though they may not know it, smart cities create comfort zones of informal, internal networks of trust. One management guru calls this zone the “ba,” a climate conducive to exchange of shared values. With the right climate, civic leaders are able to reach consensus, and their reactions and policy initiatives have greater coherence and are achieved more speedily.

Our research shows that the prowling of cities is continuous, it is growing, and the arrangements for visits are becoming more sophisticated, with many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) popping up to help match cities up, much like a dating service matches couples. A wise policy environment and enlightened public support could help cities create the right conditions for innovation, even while they are on the prowl.

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This article is adapted from the author’s new book Beyond Smart Cities—How Cities Network, Learn, and Innovate, forthcoming in January 2012 from Earthscan Publications, Ltd.

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