

Predicting Real Estate Sales Using Machine Learning and Spatial Dependence

Boosting Random Forest Predictive Accuracy Using Spatial Lags

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Introduction

What is Economic Exclusion?

Income inequality may be a defining challenge of our time. Researchers at the Urban Institute (Solomon Greene and Lei 2016) recently identified the socio-economic phenomenon of “Economic Exclusion” as one compelling explanation for the recent rise in inequality in the US. As discussed by Zuk (2015), “Neighborhoods change slowly, but over time are becoming more segregated by income, due in part to macro-level increases in income inequality”. Vulnerable populations—disproportionately communities of color, immigrants, refugees, and women—who are displaced by localized economic prosperity enter into a gradual cycle of diminished access to good jobs, good schools, health care facilities, public spaces, etc. Such systematic denial causes enduring and self-reinforcing poverty over the course years and even generations, gradually entrenching income inequality and general unrest.

One way to practically combat economic exclusion is to focus on preventing displacement, however, detecting gentrification at an early enough stage can be a daunting task. When an area experiences economic growth, increased housing demands and subsequent affordability pressures can lead to evictions of low-income families and small businesses. Government agencies and nonprofits tend to intervene once displacement is already underway, and after-the-fact interventions can be costly and ineffective. There are a host of preemptive actions that can be deployed to stem divestment and ensure that existing residents benefit from new investments. Not unlike medical treatment, early detection is key to success. Consequently, in 2016, the Urban Institute put forth a call for research into the creation of “neighborhood-level early warning and response systems that can help city leaders and community advocates get ahead of neighborhood changes” (2016).

(M. Chapple Karen; Zuk 2016) To be included in the “motivation” section of my thesis. Not about predictive modeling, but is a very recent overview of the application of predictive gentrification models

How Can Machine Learning Help?

Predictive modeling using spatial dependence has been employed extensively in recent years, notably in Crime Prediction (Almanie 2015). However, a key deficiency of many spatial models are their use of arbitrarily defined geographic regions, such as zip codes, political districts, police precincts, state lines, neighborhoods, etc. which diminish and obscure potentially valuable insights. Worse yet, many predictive models ignore spatial dependence, violating one of the basic tenets of geography: the direct relationship between distance and likeness (Miller 2007).

Our Contribution

This paper explores novel techniques to predict gentrification in the pursuit of combating displacement and economic exclusion. Modern techniques of data mining, machine learning and predictive modeling are applied to data sets describing property values and sale prices in New York City. We demonstrate that the incorporation of spatial lags, i.e., variables created from physically proximate observations, can improve the predictive accuracy of machine learning models above and beyond both non-spatial models as well as models which incorporate data aggregated at arbitrary geographic regions such as zip codes.

Literature Review

The literature review for this paper reviews the concept of Economic Displacement as it has been addressed in academia, primarily in relation to the study of gentrification. We also examine “mass appraisal techniques”, which are automated analytical techniques used for valuing large numbers of real estate properties. Finally, we will briefly examine machine learning as it relates to the problem of predicting gentrification and/or Economic Displacement.

How Has Economic Displacement Been Addressed in the Past?

Economic Displacement has been intertwined with the study of gentrification since shortly after the latter became academically relevant in the 1960’s. The term “gentrification” was first used by Ruth Glass in 1964 to described the “gentry” in low income neighborhoods in London. Gentrification was originally understood as a “tool of revitalization for declining neighborhoods” (Zuk 2015), however, in 1979 Phillip Clay made the distinction between two types of revitalization: “incumbent upgrading” and “gentrification”, noting that Economic Displacement was the negative consequence of the latter (Clay 1979). Today, the term has evolved

to describe “a spatial organization and re-organization of human dwelling and activity” (Zuk 2015). Specific to cities, gentrification is thought of as “the transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city into middle-class residential or commercial use” (Lees 2008).

Studies of gentrification and displacement generally take two approaches in the literature: supply-side and demand-side, or “the flows of capital versus flows of people to neighborhoods”, respectively (Zuk 2015). Supply side arguments for gentrification tend to focus on “private capital investment, public policies, and public investments” (Zuk 2015). (Smith 1979) argued that the return of capital from the suburbs to the city drives gentrification. He describes a “political economy of capital flows into urban areas” (Zuk 2015) as largely responsible for both the positive and negative consequences of gentrification. According to (Dreier 2004), public policies that have been linked to increased Economic Displacement have been, among others, automobile-oriented transportation infrastructure spending and mortgage interest tax deductions for home owners.

More recently, income inequality has been explored as a major contributor to Economic Displacement, specifically, “higher compensation in the top quintile and the lack of jobs for the bottom quintile” (Reardon 2011); (Watson 2009). The concentration of wealth allows “certain households to sort themselves according to their preferences – and control local political processes that continue exclusion” (Reardon 2011). This results in a self-reinforcing feedback loop where wealthier households influence public policy toward their self interest. Gentrification prediction tools could be used to help break such feedback loops through early identification and intervention. Reardon (2011) also argues that “were income inequality to stop rising, the number of segregated neighborhoods would decline.”

Many studies conclude that gentrification in most forms leads to exclusionary economic displacement, however, Zuk (2015) characterizes the results of many recent studies as “mixed, due in part to methodological shortcomings”. In this paper, we attempt to further the understanding of gentrification prediction by demonstrating a technique to better predict real estate sales in New York City.

A Review of Mass Appraisal Techniques

Much of the research on predicting real estate prices has been in service of creating mass appraisal models. Mass appraisal models are most commonly used by local governments for the purpose of collecting taxes from property owners. Mass appraisal models share many characteristics with predictive machine learning models, in that they are data-driven, standardized methods that employ statistical testing (Eckert 1990). A variation on mass appraisal models are the “automated valuation models” (AVM), which use “often the same methodological framework of mass appraisal. . . a statistical model and a large amount of property data to estimate the market value of an individual property or portfolio of properties” (d’Amato 2017).

Scientific mass appraisal models date back to 1936 with the reappraisal of St. Paul, Minnesota (Silverherz 1936). Since that time, and accelerated with the advent of computers, much statistical research has been done relating property values and rent prices to various characteristics of those properties, including characteristics of their surrounding area. Multiple regression analysis (MRA) has been the most common set of statistical tools used in mass appraisal, including Maximum Likelihood, Weighted Least Squares, and the most popular, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) (d’Amato 2017). The primary drawbacks of MRA techniques are “excessive multicollinearity among attributes” and “spatial autocorrelation among residuals” (d’Amato 2017). Another group of models that seek to correct for spatial dependence are known as Spatial Auto Regressive (SAR) models, chief among them the Spatial Lag Model, which aggregates weighted summaries of nearby properties in order to create independent regression variables (d’Amato 2017).

Hedonic regression models generally seek to break down the price of a good based on the intrinsic and extrinsic components. Koschinsky (2012) is a recent and thorough discussion of parametric hedonic regression techniques. Some of the variables included in Koschinsky’s models are derived from nearby properties, similar to the technique used in this paper, and these variables were found to be predictive. The real estate hedonic

model as defined by Koschinsky describes the price of a property as:

$$P_i = P(S_i, N_i, L_i)$$

Where P_i represents the price of house i , which is a composite good comprised of a vector of structural characteristics S , a vector of social and neighborhood characteristics N , and a vector of locational characteristics L . Specifically, the model calculates spatial lags on properties of interest using neighboring properties within 1,000 feet of a sale. The derived variables include characteristics like average age, quantity of poor condition homes, percent of homes with electric heating, construction grade, etc. within 1,000 feet of the property in question. Koschinsky found that in all cases, “the relation between a home’s price and the average price of its neighboring homes is characterized by positive spatial autocorrelation” meaning that homes near each other were typically similar to each other and priced accordingly. Koschinsky concluded that locational characteristics should be valued at least as much “if not more” than important structural characteristics.

As recently as 2015, much research has dealt with mitigating the drawbacks of MRA, including the use of multi-level hierarchical models. Fotheringham (2015) explored the combination of Geographically Weighted Regression (GWR) with time-series forecasting to predict home prices over time. GWR is a variation on OLS that allows for “adaptive bandwidths” of local data to be included, i.e., for each estimate, the number of data points included varies and can be optimized using cross-validation.

Automated valuation modeling got a legal update in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis by way of the The Dodd Frank Act. In particular, the Title XIV, subtitle F distinguishes the “appraisal” process from automated valuation modelling, and reorganized both (d’Amato 2017). The Act asserts that appraisal, or valuation conducted by a human being, cannot be replaced by AVM. At current, AVM is “increasingly adaptable in describing real estate market behavior” but has yet to supersede the importance and necessity of local information and human evaluation.

Has Machine Learning Been Applied to this Problem Before?

Both Mass Appraisal techniques and Automated Valuation Modeling seek to predict real estate prices using data and statistical methods, however, traditional techniques typically fall short of reality. This is because property valuation is inherently a “chaotic” process that does not lend itself to binary or linear analysis (Zuk 2015). The value of any given property is a complex combination of perceived value and speculation. The value of any building or plot of land belongs to a rich network where decisions about and perceptions of neighboring properties influence the final market value. Guan et al. (2014) compared traditional MRA techniques to alternative “data mining techniques” resulting in “mixed results”. However, as Helbich (2013) states, hedonic pricing models “can be improved in two ways: (a) Through novel estimation techniques, and (b) by ancillary structural, locational, and neighborhood variables on the basis of Geographic Information System (GIS)”. Recent research generally falls into these two buckets: better analysis algorithms and/or better data.

In the “better data” category, researchers have been striving to introduce new independent variables to increase the accuracy of predictive models. Dietzell (2014) successfully used internet search query data provided by Google Trends to serve as a sentiment indicator and improve commercial real estate forecasting models. Pivo and Fisher (2011) examined the effects of walkability on property values and investment returns. Pivo found that on a 100-point scale, a 10-point increase in walkability increased property investment values by up to 9%.

Research into better prediction algorithms do not necessarily happen at the exclusion of “better data”. For example, Fu (2014) created a prediction algorithm, called “ClusRanking”, for real estate in Beijing, China. ClusRanking first estimates neighborhood characteristics using taxi cab traffic vector data, specifically as they relate to accessibility to “business areas”. Then, the algorithm performs a rank-ordered prediction

of investment returns segmented into five categories. Similar to Koschinsky (2012), though less formally stated, Fu (2014) thought of a property’s value as a composite of individual, peer and zone characteristics. In the predictive model, Fu includes characteristics of the neighborhood (individual), the values of its nearby properties (peer), and the prosperity of the affiliated latent business area (zone) based on taxi cab data (Fu 2014).

Several other recent studies compare various “advanced” statistical techniques and algorithms either to other advanced techniques or to traditional ones. Most studies conclude that the advanced, non-parametric techniques outperform traditional parametric techniques, while several conclude that the Random Forest algorithm is particularly well-suited to predicting real estate values.

Kontrimasa (2011) compares the accuracy of linear regression against the SVM technique and found the latter to outperform. Scherthanner H. (2016) compared traditional linear regression techniques to several techniques such as kriging (stochastic interpolation) and Random Forest. They concluded that the more advanced techniques, particularly random forest, are sound and more accurate when compared to traditional statistical methods. Antipov and Pokryshevskaya (2012) comes to a similar conclusion about the superiority of Random Forest to real estate valuation after comparing 10 algorithms: multiple regression, CHAID, Exhaustive CHAID, CART, 2 types of k-Nearest Neighbors, Multilayer Perceptron neural network (MLP), Radial Basis Function neural network (RBF)), Boosted Trees and finally Random Forest.

Guan et al. (2014) compared three different approaches to defining spatial neighbors: a simple radius technique, a k-nearest neighbors technique using only distance and a k-nearest neighbors technique using all attributes. Interestingly, the location-only KNN models performed best, although by a slight margin. Park (2015) developed several housing price prediction models based on machine learning algorithms including C4.5, RIPPER, Naive Bayesian, and AdaBoost. By comparing the models’ classification accuracy performance, the experiments demonstrate that the RIPPER algorithm, based on accuracy, consistently outperformed the other models in the performance of housing price prediction. Rafiei (2016) employed a restricted boltzmann machine (neural network with back propagation) to predict the sale price of residential condos in Tehran, Iran. Rather than focusing on predictive performance, their paper focuses on computational efficiency. A non-mating genetic algorithm is used for dimensionality reduction. The paper concludes that two primary strategies help in this regard: weighting property sales by temporal proximity (sales which happened closer in time are more important), and also using a learner to accelerate the recognition of important features. The paper compares this technique to several other common neural network approaches and finds that while not necessarily the only way to get the best answer, it is the fastest way to get to the best answer.

Finally, it should be noted that many studies, whether exploring advanced techniques, new data, or both, rely on aggregation of data by some arbitrary boundary. For example, Turner and Snow (2001) predicted gentrification in the Washington, D.C. metro area by ranking census tracts in terms of development. K. Chapple (2009) created a gentrification “early warning system” by identifying low income census tracts in central city locations. Barry Bluestone & Chase Billingham (2010) analyzed 42 census block groups near rail stations in 12 metro areas across the United States, studying changes between 1990 and 2000 for neighborhood socioeconomic and housing characteristics. All of these studies, and many more, relied on aggregation of data at the census-tract or census-block level. In contrast, this paper compares boundary-aggregation techniques (specifically, aggregating by zip codes) to spatial-lag techniques and finds the spatial lag techniques to generally outperform.

Methodology

Our goal is to compare the use of spatial lags as features in a machine learning predictive model against traditional feature engineering techniques. We will create three modeling data sets:

- Base
- Zip Code

- Spatial Lag

We will then create 2 predictive models for each modeling data set, using a different outcome variable for each:

- 1) Probability of Sale. The probability that a given property in New York City will sell in a given year
- 2) Amount of Sale. Given that a property sells, how much is the sale value?

There will be six predictive models built in total, as follows:

#	Model	Model Type	Data	Outcome Variable	Outcome Var Type	Evaluation Metric
1	Probability of Sale	Classification	Base	Building Sold	Binary	AUC
2	Probability of Sale	Classification	Zip Code	Building Sold	Binary	AUC
3	Probability of Sale	Classification	Spatial Lags	Building Sold	Binary	AUC
4	Sale Price	Regression	Base	Sale Price per SF	Continuous	RMSE
5	Sale Price	Regression	Zip Code	Sale Price per SF	Continuous	RMSE
6	Sale Price	Regression	Spatial Lag	Sale Price per SF	Continuous	RMSE

To accomplish this, we combine three open-source data repositories provided by New York City via nyc.gov and data.cityofnewyork.us. Our base modeling data set includes all building records and associated sales information from 2003-2017.

Following the creation of the base modeling data, we create two additional data sets through feature engineering: a “Zip Code features” data set and a “Spatial Lag features” data set. The primary goal of this study is to compare the predictive power of the spatial lags vs. the base and zip code features.

Data

The New York City government makes available an annual data set which describes all tax lots in the five boroughs. The Primary Land Use and Tax Lot Output data set, known as PLUTO, contains a single record for every tax lot in the city along with a number of building and tax-related attributes such as Year Built, Assessed Value, Square Footage, number of stories, and many more. At the time of this writing, NYC has made this data set available for all years between 2002-2017, excluding 2008. For convenience, we also exclude the 2002 data set from our analysis because sales information is not available for that year. Importantly for our analysis, the latitude and longitude of the tax lots are also made available, allowing us to locate in space each building and to build geospatial features from the data.

Ultimately, we are interested in sales transactions—both frequency, and amount. Sales transactions are also made available by the New York City government, known as NYC Rolling Sales Data. At the time of this writing, sales transactions are available for the years 2003-2017. The sales transactions data contains additional data fields describing time, place, and amount of sale as well as additional building characteristics. Crucially, the sales transaction data does not include geographical coordinates, making it impossible to perform geospatial analysis without first mapping the sales data to PLUTO.

Prior to mapping to PLUTO, the sales data must first be transformed to include the proper mapping key. New York City uses a standard key of Borough-Block-Lot to identify tax lots in the data. For example, 31 West 27th Street is located in Manhattan, on block 829 and lot 16, therefore, its Borough-Block-Lot (BBL) is 1_829_16 (the 1 represents Manhattan). The sales data contains BBL’s at the building level, however, the sales transactions data does not appropriately designate condos as their own BBLs. Mapping the sales data directly to the PLUTO data results in a mapping error rate of 23.1%. Therefore, the sales transactions data must first be mapped to another data source, the NYC Property Address Directory, or PAD), which contains an exhaustive list of all BBLs in NYC. Once the sales data is combined with PAD, the data can be mapped

to PLUTO with an error rate of 0.291%.

After the Sales Transactions data has been mapped to PAD, it can then be mapped to PLUTO. The sales data is normalized and filtered so that only BBLs with less than or equal to 1 transactions in a year occur. The final data set is an exhaustive list of all tax lots in NYC for every year between 2003-2017, whether that building was sold, for what amount, and several other additional variables.

Only building categories of significant interest are included in the data. The following building types are included:

Category	Description
A	ONE FAMILY DWELLINGS
B	TWO FAMILY DWELLINGS
C	WALK UP APARTMENTS
D	ELEVATOR APARTMENTS
F	FACTORY AND INDUSTRIAL BUILDINGS
G	GARAGES AND GASOLINE STATIONS
L	LOFT BUILDINGS
O	OFFICES

The data is further filtered to include only records with equal to or less than 2 buildings per tax lot. The global filtering of the data set reduces the base modeling data from 12,012,780 records down to 8,247,499.

Feature Engineering

Base modeling data

The base modeling data set is enhanced to include additional features. A summary table of the additional features are presented below:

Feature	Min	Median	Mean	Max
has_building_area	0	1.00	1.00	1.00
Percent_Com	0	0.00	0.16	1.00
Percent_Res	0	1.00	0.82	1.00
Percent_Office	0	0.00	0.07	1.00
Percent_Retail	0	0.00	0.04	1.00
Percent_Garage	0	0.00	0.01	1.00
Percent_Storage	0	0.00	0.02	1.00
Percent_Factory	0	0.00	0.00	1.00
Percent_Other	0	0.00	0.00	1.00
Last_Sale_Price	0	312.68	531.02	62,055.59
Last_Sale_Price_Total	2	2,966,835.00	12,844,252.00	1,932,900,000.00
Years_Since_Last_Sale	1	4.00	5.05	14.00
SMA_Price_2_year	0	296.92	500.89	62,055.59
SMA_Price_3_year	0	294.94	495.29	62,055.59
SMA_Price_5_year	0	300.12	498.82	62,055.59
Percent_Change_SMA_2	-1	0.00	685.69	15,749,999.50
Percent_Change_SMA_5	-1	0.00	337.77	6,299,999.80
EMA_Price_2_year	0	288.01	482.69	62,055.59
EMA_Price_3_year	0	283.23	471.98	62,055.59

Feature	Min	Median	Mean	Max
EMA_Price_5_year	0	278.67	454.15	62,055.59
Percent_Change_EMA_2	-1	0.00	422.50	9,415,128.85
Percent_Change_EMA_5	-1	0.06	308.05	5,341,901.60

A binary variable is created to indicate whether a tax lot has a building on it (i.e., whether it is an empty plot of land or not). In addition, building types are quantified by what percent of the square footage belongs to the major property types: Commercial, Residential, Office, Retail, Garage, Storage, Factory and Other.

Importantly, two variables are created from the Sales Prices: A price-per-square-foot figure (“Last_Sale_Price”) and a total Sale Price (“Last_Sale_Price_Total”). Sale Price per Square foot eventually becomes the outcome variable in one of the predictive models, even though it is referred to as Sale Price. Further features are derived which carry forward the previous sale price of a tax lot, if there is one, through successive years. Previous Sale Price is then used to create Simple Moving Averages (SMA), Exponential Moving Averages (SMA), and percent change measurements between the moving averages. In total, 69 variables are input to the feature engineering process and 92 variables are output. The final base modeling data set is 92 variables by 8,247,499 rows.

Zip code modeling data

The first of the comparative modeling data sets is the Zip code modeling data. Using the base data as a starting point, several features are generated to describe characteristics of the zip code where the tax lot resides. A summary table of the Zip code level features is presented below.

Feature	Min	Median	Mean	Max
Last_Year_Zip_Sold	0.00	27.00	31.14	112.00
Last_Year_Zip_Sold_Percent_Ch	-1.00	0.00	Inf	Inf
Last_Sale_Price_zip_code_average	0.00	440.95	522.87	1,961.21
Last_Sale_Price_Total_zip_code_average	10.00	5,312,874.67	11,877,688.55	1,246,450,000.00
Last_Sale_Date_zip_code_average	12,066.00	13,338.21	13,484.39	17,149.00
Years_Since_Last_Sale_zip_code_average	1.00	4.84	4.26	11.00
SMA_Price_2_year_zip_code_average	34.31	429.26	501.15	2,092.41
SMA_Price_3_year_zip_code_average	34.31	422.04	496.47	2,090.36
SMA_Price_5_year_zip_code_average	39.48	467.04	520.86	2,090.36
Percent_Change_SMA_2_zip_code_average	-0.20	0.04	616.47	169,999.90
Percent_Change_SMA_5_zip_code_average	-0.09	0.03	341.68	113,333.27
EMA_Price_2_year_zip_code_average	30.77	401.43	479.38	1,883.81
EMA_Price_3_year_zip_code_average	33.48	419.11	479.95	1,781.38
EMA_Price_5_year_zip_code_average	29.85	431.89	472.80	1,506.46
Percent_Change_EMA_2_zip_code_average	-0.16	0.06	388.90	107,368.37
Percent_Change_EMA_5_zip_code_average	-0.08	0.07	326.17	107,368.38
Last_Sale_Price_bt_only	0.00	357.71	485.97	6,401.01
Last_Sale_Price_Total_bt_only	10.00	3,797,461.46	11,745,130.56	1,246,450,000.00
Last_Sale_Date_bt_only	12,055.00	13,331.92	13,497.75	17,149.00
Years_Since_Last_Sale_bt_only	1.00	4.78	4.30	14.00
SMA_Price_2_year_bt_only	0.00	347.59	462.67	5,519.39
SMA_Price_3_year_bt_only	0.00	345.40	458.50	5,104.51
SMA_Price_5_year_bt_only	0.00	372.30	481.09	4,933.05
Percent_Change_SMA_2_bt_only	-0.55	0.03	600.10	425,675.69
Percent_Change_SMA_5_bt_only	-0.33	0.02	338.15	188,888.78
EMA_Price_2_year_bt_only	0.00	332.98	442.79	5,103.51

Feature	Min	Median	Mean	Max
EMA_Price_3_year_bt_only	0.00	332.79	443.02	4,754.95
EMA_Price_5_year_bt_only	0.00	340.57	436.70	4,270.37
Percent_Change_EMA_2_bt_only	-0.47	0.06	377.17	254,462.97
Percent_Change_EMA_5_bt_only	-0.34	0.06	335.17	178,947.30

In general, the base model data features are aggregated to a zip code level and attached to the individual observations, including SMA and EMA calculations. Additionally, a second set of features are added, denoted as “bt_only”, which filter only for tax lots of the same building type. In total, the Zip code feature engineering process inputs 92 variables and outputs 122 variables.

Spatial Lag modeling data

Spatial lags are variables created from physically proximate observations. For example, taking the average building age from all buildings within 100 meters of the tax lot in question would be a spatial lag. Creating spatial lags presents both advantages and disadvantages in the modeling process. Spatial lags allow for much more fine-tuned measurements of a building’s surrounding area. Knowing the average sale price of all buildings within 500 meters of a building can be much informative than knowing the sale prices of all buildings in the same zip code. However, building spatial lags is computationally expensive.

To build spatial lags for all 8,247,499 observations in our modeling data, we created a spatial indexing technique that sped up the process by allowing for parallelization of the operation. Since tax lots rarely if ever move, we reduced the indexing task to 514,124 points (the number of unique tax lots in New York City). Then, for each point, we calculated and cached every other tax lot within 500 meters of that building. The result was an origin-destination relationship graph that connected each tax lot to its surrounding tax lots.

Next, we used the spatial index to create spatial lag features. One advantage to using spatial lags is the rich number of potential features which can be created. Spatial lags can be weighted based on a distance function, i.e., physically closer observations can be given more weight. For our modeling purposes, we created two sets of features: distance weighted features (denoted with a “_dist”) and simple average features (denoted with “_basic”). SMA and EMA as well as percent changes were also calculated. In total, the spatial lag feature engineering process input 92 variables and output 194 variables. A summary of the Spatial Lag features are presented below:

Feature	Min	Median	Mean	Max
Radius_Total_Sold_In_Year	1.00	20.00	24.00	203.00
Radius_Average_Years_Since_Last_Sale	1.00	4.43	4.27	14.00
Radius_Res_Units_Sold_In_Year	0.00	226.00	289.10	2,900.00
Radius_All_Units_Sold_In_Year	0.00	255.00	325.94	2,900.00
Radius_SF_Sold_In_Year	0.00	259,403.00	430,891.57	8,600.00
Radius_Total_Sold_In_Year_sum_over_2_years	2.00	41.00	48.15	250.00
Radius_Average_Years_Since_Last_Sale_sum_over_2_years	2.00	9.25	8.70	26.00
Radius_Res_Units_Sold_In_Year_sum_over_2_years	0.00	493.00	584.67	3,300.00
Radius_All_Units_Sold_In_Year_sum_over_2_years	1.00	555.00	660.67	4,200.00
Radius_SF_Sold_In_Year_sum_over_2_years	2,917.00	580,947.00	872,816.44	14,000.00
Radius_Total_Sold_In_Year_percent_change	-0.99	0.00	0.27	77.00
Radius_Average_Years_Since_Last_Sale_percent_change	-0.91	0.13	0.26	8.00
Radius_Res_Units_Sold_In_Year_percent_change	-1.00	-0.04	Inf	Inf
Radius_All_Units_Sold_In_Year_percent_change	-1.00	-0.04	Inf	Inf
Radius_SF_Sold_In_Year_percent_change	-1.00	-0.02	Inf	Inf
Radius_Total_Sold_In_Year_sum_over_2_years_percent_change	-0.96	-0.03	0.03	15.00

Feature	Min	Median	Mean	Max
Radius_Average_Years_Since_Last_Sale_sum_over_2_years_percent_change	-0.72	0.12	0.17	2.5
Radius_Res_Units_Sold_In_Year_sum_over_2_years_percent_change	-1.00	-0.04	Inf	Inf
Radius_All_Units_Sold_In_Year_sum_over_2_years_percent_change	-0.99	-0.04	0.12	84.0
Radius_SF_Sold_In_Year_sum_over_2_years_percent_change	-0.98	-0.04	0.18	36.0
Percent_Com_dist	0.00	0.04	0.07	0.5
Percent_Res_dist	0.00	0.46	0.43	0.6
Percent_Office_dist	0.00	0.01	0.03	0.4
Percent_Retail_dist	0.00	0.02	0.02	0.0
Percent_Garage_dist	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.2
Percent_Storage_dist	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.2
Percent_Factory_dist	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.0
Percent_Other_dist	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.0
Percent_Com_basic_mean	0.00	0.04	0.07	0.5
Percent_Res_basic_mean	0.00	0.46	0.43	0.6
Percent_Office_basic_mean	0.00	0.01	0.03	0.4
Percent_Retail_basic_mean	0.00	0.02	0.02	0.0
Percent_Garage_basic_mean	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.2
Percent_Storage_basic_mean	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.2
Percent_Factory_basic_mean	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.0
Percent_Other_basic_mean	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.0
Percent_Com_dist_perc_change	-0.90	0.00	0.00	6.1
Percent_Res_dist_perc_change	-0.50	0.00	0.03	36.0
Percent_Office_dist_perc_change	-1.00	0.00	Inf	Inf
Percent_Retail_dist_perc_change	-0.82	0.00	Inf	Inf
Percent_Garage_dist_perc_change	-1.00	0.00	Inf	Inf
Percent_Storage_dist_perc_change	-1.00	-0.01	Inf	Inf
Percent_Factory_dist_perc_change	-1.00	0.00	Inf	Inf
Percent_Other_dist_perc_change	-1.00	0.00	Inf	Inf
SMA_Price_2_year_dist	0.00	400.01	496.30	3,800.0
SMA_Price_3_year_dist	0.00	396.94	492.00	3,800.0
SMA_Price_5_year_dist	8.83	425.55	515.29	3,800.0
Percent_Change_SMA_2_dist	-0.13	0.03	552.33	804.0
Percent_Change_SMA_5_dist	-0.09	0.02	317.46	322.0
EMA_Price_2_year_dist	0.00	378.63	475.54	3,400.0
EMA_Price_3_year_dist	8.83	382.25	476.05	3,200.0
EMA_Price_5_year_dist	7.88	386.34	468.91	2,800.0
Percent_Change_EMA_2_dist	-0.09	0.06	346.51	480.0
Percent_Change_EMA_5_dist	-0.02	0.06	303.55	273.0
SMA_Price_2_year_basic_mean	0.02	412.46	496.75	2,500.0
SMA_Price_3_year_basic_mean	0.02	409.00	492.43	2,500.0
SMA_Price_5_year_basic_mean	17.16	443.34	515.67	2,600.0
Percent_Change_SMA_2_basic_mean	-0.13	0.04	543.51	393.0
Percent_Change_SMA_5_basic_mean	-0.09	0.03	312.46	157.0
EMA_Price_2_year_basic_mean	0.02	390.30	475.96	2,200.0
EMA_Price_3_year_basic_mean	11.39	393.25	476.45	2,100.0
EMA_Price_5_year_basic_mean	15.30	402.06	469.09	1,800.0
Percent_Change_EMA_2_basic_mean	-0.09	0.06	340.89	233.0
Percent_Change_EMA_5_basic_mean	-0.02	0.06	296.78	133.0
SMA_Price_2_year_dist_perc_change	-0.74	0.05	0.17	10.0
SMA_Price_3_year_dist_perc_change	-0.74	0.05	0.17	10.0
SMA_Price_5_year_dist_perc_change	-0.74	0.04	0.06	15.0
Percent_Change_SMA_2_dist_perc_change	-Inf	-0.24	NaN	Inf

Feature	Min	Median	Mean	Max
Percent_Change_SMA_5_dist_perc_change	-Inf	-0.14	NaN	Inf
EMA_Price_2_year_dist_perc_change	-0.74	0.06	0.18	10.0
EMA_Price_3_year_dist_perc_change	-0.73	0.06	0.08	15.0
EMA_Price_5_year_dist_perc_change	-0.63	0.06	0.07	12.0
Percent_Change_EMA_2_dist_perc_change	-Inf	-0.13	NaN	Inf
Percent_Change_EMA_5_dist_perc_change	-556.60	-0.10	Inf	Inf
SMA_Price_2_year_basic_mean_perc_change	-0.55	0.05	0.12	9.3
SMA_Price_3_year_basic_mean_perc_change	-0.55	0.05	0.11	9.3
SMA_Price_5_year_basic_mean_perc_change	-0.50	0.04	0.06	5.9
Percent_Change_SMA_2_basic_mean_perc_change	-Inf	-0.19	NaN	Inf
Percent_Change_SMA_5_basic_mean_perc_change	-Inf	-0.12	NaN	Inf
EMA_Price_2_year_basic_mean_perc_change	-0.53	0.06	0.12	9.3
EMA_Price_3_year_basic_mean_perc_change	-0.47	0.06	0.08	23.0
EMA_Price_5_year_basic_mean_perc_change	-0.37	0.06	0.07	4.8
Percent_Change_EMA_2_basic_mean_perc_change	-Inf	-0.13	NaN	Inf
Percent_Change_EMA_5_basic_mean_perc_change	-136.59	-0.11	Inf	Inf

Outcome variables

The final step in creating the modeling data is to define the outcome variables. For our purposes, we create two dependent variables: - Sold. Whether a tax lot sold in a given year. Used in the Probability of Sale classification model. - Sale Price. The price-per-square foot associated with a transaction, if a sale took place. Used in the Sale Price Regression model.

The following table describes the distributions of both outcome variables:

	Sold	Sale Price per SF
Min.	0.00	0.0
1st Qu.	0.00	163.5
Median	0.00	375.2
Mean	0.04	644.8
3rd Qu.	0.00	783.3
Max.	1.00	83,598.7

Algorithm

Previous works (see: Antipov and Pokryshevskaya (2012); also Scherthanner H. (2016)) have found the Random Forest algorithm (Breiman 2001) suitable to prediction tasks involving real estate. While algorithms exist that may marginally outperform Random Forest in terms of predictive accuracy (such as neural networks and functional gradient descent algorithms), Random Forest is highly scalable and parallelizable, and therefore a natural choice for comparing different feature engineering strategies (such as in this paper).

Random Forest can be used for both classification and regression tasks. The Random Forest algorithm works by generating a large number of independent classification or regression decision trees and then employing majority voting (for classification) or averaging (for regression) to generate predictions. Over a dataset of N rows by M predictors, a bootstrap sample of the data is chosen ($n < N$) as well as a subset of the predictors ($m < M$). Individual decision/regression trees are built on the n by m sample. Because the trees can be built independently (and not sequentially, as is the case with most functional gradient descent algorithms), the tree

building process can be executed in parallel across an arbitrary number of computer cores. With a sufficiently large number of cores, the model training time can be significantly reduced. This provides a highly accurate, robust prediction model that avoids many of the drawbacks of traditional parametric techniques, such as OLS.

The primary advantages to using Random Forest with real estate data are:

1. Can handle an arbitrarily large number of variables while avoiding the curse of dimensionality associated with regression techniques. Increasing the number of predictors in a multiple regression can quickly lead to overfitting.
2. Can accomodate categorical variables with many levels. Real estate data often contains information describing the location of the property, or the property itself, as one of a large set of possible choices, such as neighborhood, county, census tract, district, property type, and zoning information. Because factors need to be recoded as individual dummy variables in the model building process, factors with many levels will quickly encounter the curse of dimensionality in multiple regression techniques.
3. Appropriately handles missing data. Predictions can be made with the parts of the tree which are succesfully built, and therefore, there is no need to filter out incomplete observations or impute missing values. Since much real destate data is self reported, incomplete fields are common in the data.
4. Robust against outliers. Because of bootstrap sampling, outliers appear in individual trees less often, and therefore, are reduced in terms of importance. Real estate data, especially with regards to pricing, tends to contain outliers. For example, the dependent variable in one of our models, Sale Price (see: Table 5), shows a clear divergence in median and mean, as well as a maximum significantly higher than the third quartile.
5. Can recognize non-linear relationships in data, which is useful when modeling spatial relationships.
6. Is not affected by colinearity in the data. This is highly valuable as real estate data can be highly correlated.
7. The algorithm can be parallelized and is relatively fast compared to nueral networks and functional gradient descent algorithms.

To run the model, we have chosen the `h2o.randomForest` function from the `h2o` R open source library. The `h2o` implementation of the Random Forest algorithm is particularly well-suited for high parallelization. For more information, see: <https://www.h2o.ai/>.

Evaluation Metrics

We have chosen evaluation metrics that will allow us to easily compare the performance of the models against other models with the same outcome variable. The classification models (Probability of Sale) will be compared using Area Under the ROC Curve (AUC). The regression models (Sale Price) will be compared using Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE). Both evaluation metrics are common for their respective outcome variable types, and as such will be useful for comparing within model-groups.

Area Under ROC Curve (AUC)

A classification model typically outputs a probability that a given row in the data belongs to a group. In the case of binary classification, the value falls between 0 and 1. There are many techniques for determining the cut off threshold for classification; a typical method is to assign anything above a 0.5 into the “1” or positive class. An ROC curve (receiver operating characteristic curve) plots the True Positive Rate vs. the False Positive rate at different classification thresholds; it is a meaurment of the performance of a classification model across all possible thresholds, and therefore sidesteps the need to arbitrarily assign a cutoff.

Area Under the ROC Curve, or AUC measures the entire two-dimensional area underneath the ROC curve. It is the integration of the curve from (0,0) to (1,1), defined as $AUC = \int_{(0,0)}^{(1,1)} f(x)dx$.

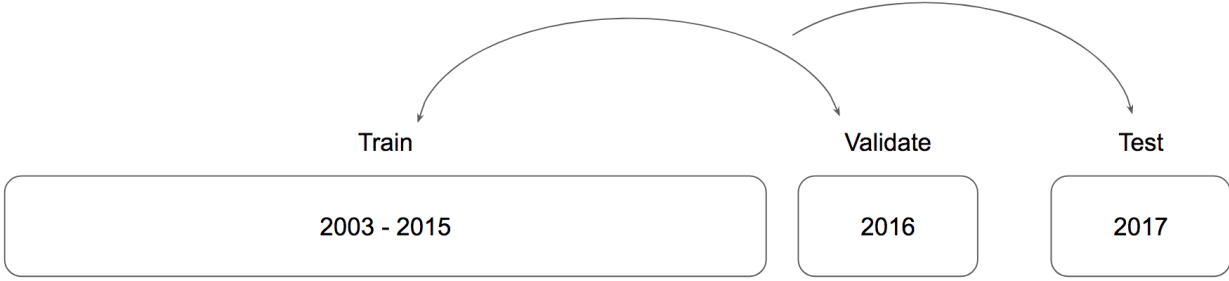


Figure 1: Out-of-time validation

AUC provides a relatively standard measure of performance across all possible classification thresholds, and can be interpreted as the probability that the model ranks a random positive example more highly than a random negative example. A value of 0.5 represents a perfectly random model, while a value of 1.0 represents a model that can perfectly discriminate between the two classes. AUC is useful for comparing classification models against one another because they are both scale and threshold-invariant.

One of the drawbacks to AUC is that it does not describe the tradeoffs between false positives and false negatives. In certain circumstances, a false positive might be considerably less desirable than a false negative, or vice-versa. For our purposes, we rank false positives and false negatives as equally undesirable outcomes.

Root Mean Squared Error

The Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE) is a common measurement of the differences between values predicted by a regression model and the observed values. It is formally defined as $RMSE = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_1^T (\hat{y}_t - y_t)^2}{T}}$, where \hat{y} represents the prediction and y represents the observed value at observation t .

Lower RMSE scores are typically more desirable. An RMSE value of 0 would indicate a perfect fit to the data. RMSE can be difficult to interpret on its own, however, it is useful for comparing models with similar outcome variables. In our case, the outcome variables (Sales Price per Square Foot) are consistent across modeling data sets, and therefore can be reasonably compared using RMSE.

Model Validation

The goal of the predictive models are to be able to successfully predict both the probability and amount of real estate sales into the near future. As such, our models will use out-of-time validation to assess performance. As shown in Figure 1 The models will be trained using data from 2003-2015. 2016 modeling data will be used during the model training process as cross-validation data. Finally, we will score our model using 2017 as a held-out sample. Using out-of-time validation should ensure that the models generalize well into the immediate future.

Results

Probability of Sale Model

Sale Price Model

Using the Models in Practice

Conclusions and Future Research

Future Research

Conclusion

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