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Post-Industrial Urbanism and The Growth of Sustainability: Historical Trends, Present and Future Observations*

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It is significant that in 2005, as a new century slowly unfolds, that there is a chronological platform from which it is possible to re-examine viewpoints and ideas concerning future national and international challenges within the urban context, in so doing allowing those may be with an interest in the urban situ to connect wider perspectives and debates to the position of the modern metropolis, the economic and cultural engines of nations. With this scenario firmly in mind this essay will present a genealogy of contemporary debates surrounding the future of towns and cities, focusing in particular on the association between health and urban planning via the Garden City metaphor, a concept originally proposed in Britain as a means to manufacture a new urban system and so a more salubrious urban society.

The Divided City

Recent years have witnessed major transitions in metropolitan living that will influence our futures. Not only are urban settlements increasing in size and sprawl, and are predicted to continue to do so, but ten-

sions within the urban situ are growing in extent as well. Significantly, these stresses are beginning to adopt new forms of articulation and have new validations, maybe in part due to our appreciation of each other becoming more fragmented and misconstrued. Differences existing within our societies are of course not new yet worryingly within the modern world they are not shrinking and in the near future at least will also not to diminish. Instead it seems these discords are on the rise due to intolerance, the decline of cultural liberty and the widening economic gap between Developed and Developing Nations, resulting it appears in increasing spates of violent behaviour and radicalism. Within metropolitan centres conflicts are also occuring, for instance, in the favellas, the slumlands, based on ever widening intra-urban disparities in income and also social and economic opportunity, issues which ultimately provide for metropolitan dissolution if not rectified adequately.

Although slums and slum cultures are not new urban phenomenons it is widely recognized that the populations found within slum districts have risen massively since the onset of industrialization and will contin-

ue to rise in the foreseeable future. However the disengagement of slums and slum dwellers from mainstream society, the 'slum problem' as it is often referred to, has long been an issue and attempts have been undertaken from ancient times to deal with it in the physical sense at least, yet it persists now and has the potential to persevere. Why? The answer to this question is not simple but takes on further importance given future projections of its increasing world-wide size and growing diversity within meteropolitan centres. Therefore our first early-21st century global endeavour arguably must be to generate extensive urban policies to deal with intra-urban conflict management in order to better socially and economically integrate citizens within towns and cities, particularly those inhabiting the slums of the world. However, within the modern epoch the problems of dealing with slums and slum life, the 'housing question' as it was known, first caught public attention in England. As the world's first urban nation, that is the first country in the world with more than 50% living in urban places, England's public authorities from as early as the 1830s were forced into establishing a legal framework which would help establish betterment in the environmental sense but also in the social sense too as by that time it was recognised that modern urban living was far from healthy for the majority of the population and that problems created by the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation would not rectify themselves without fundamental assistance. Given their understanding the British saw urbanisation as the cause, and through the application of policies relating to housing, for example, also a partial cure of working class predicaments, such as their breaching from urban society and the squalid conditions within which many lived. The British thus set out on a largely environmentally centred course, a rational process of political adjustment influenced by empirical thoughts to balance the forces of liberal democracy and propertied interests within the context of economic development to cope with those problems which modern governments in many of the world's regions have to currently deal: economic growth keeping pace with population growth and being distributed throughout society (to some extent); social pressures such as bad housing, the provision of social services, overcrowding, disease and poverty; environmental issues arisen from urbanisation, such as pollution; managing the urban structure and form so as to provide better quality of life and determine socio-economic equity and better resource efficiency.

With the rise of industrialisation and its sustained development a variety of inter-related factors have influenced the form of towns and cities and the quality of life for people residing within them. These issues include, by way of illustration, rapidly expanding urban populations and the sometimes misguided character of local administrations to adequately deal with matters of disease, dirt, poverty, overcrowding and unemployment. Of significance too has been the growth of speculative building and the demands of builders wishing to obtain maximum financial returns on their economic outlays. As a consequence of the combined force of these factors, existing arrangements for urban living are becoming rendered as deficient in many regions of the world. Modern city life has consequently become complex, social and economic challanges are faced on a daily basis and the reorganisation of city administrations has been imperative in some instances so that citizens can adapt to the cultural transitions associated with urbanization and industrialization.

The British Model: Public Policy, Philanthropy, The Garden City

The unfolding of rational approaches to the urban form, first promoted in Britain in the early-Victorian period (from the 1830s), marked a fundamental change in the comprehension of the association between social and economic growth and the urban environment, a consequence of the development of the understanding that the social conditions created under the forces of industrialization and urbanization were not conducive to decent living for working class people. The British vision to the future cre-

ated and expanded in that century, a plausible means to negate the social costs of progress and development, was achieved through intervening in the housing market by introducing rules to improve the quality of new privately built houses – very much a long-term strategy - to be achieved by way of introducing new building regulations and instigating the provision of open space about buildings. Significantly, this paradigm was flexible enough in nature to be enhanced at later dates when problems, e.g. when epidemics occurred or at times of political fervour when politicians, particularly at the local level, became aware of their civic obligation to take the needs of both comtemporary and future generations into account when making present-day decisions, e.g. when clearing slum buildings and reconstructing areas of a city.

The role of private initiatives based on philanthropic ideals also provided environmental and social models that became woven into the urban development model in Britain, a process that ultimately developed into formative statutory town planning practice by the early-1900s – Britain being the first nation to pass legislation with 'town planning' in the title in 1909. Settlements such as Saltaire (1850s) near Bradford highlighted the benefits of establishing communities with good houses and facilities open to all social classes whilst late-Victorian model communties like Port Sunlight (1888) and Bournville (1895) demonstrated that it was physically and financially possible to build good quality houses for working people, arranged in these cases in a landscaped, low density environment. Inspired by the English village idyll and Ebenezer Howard's Garden City concept (1898), an experiment in social and environmental reform which proposed to abolish slums and unemployment via building a new urban civilisation based in countryside surroundings that took the best environmental, economic and social aspects from the town, the countrside and the suburban environmentt, British urbanism thus emerged by 1900 with lines of health and social integration at its core through the promotion of community values. The brilliance of Howard's idea, whilst evidently

historic, still appeals in the early years of this century not just because of what it represented over 100 years ago but due to its unique combination of proposals which can be dissembled and applied at will, and for what it can be seen to represent in the context of the early-21st century, as highlighted subsequently.

Sustainable Development

Urban planning in recent years has been revolutionised by the rise of notions connected with Sustainable Development. Although the term was coined in the late-1980s it has in recent years radically transformed planning policy thinking at the local, regional, national and international context. Often problematic to define due to the arising of varying meanings, Sustainable Development may be noted as being a social, economic and environmental process permitting communities to foresee and deal with both present-day and future needs, finding the middle ground so that contemporary needs are not met at the expense of future generations.

While the purpose of this paper is to neither dissect the history of British urbanism nor dismember the current comprehension of what Sustainable Development is or is not, this work can nonetheless suggest that past models of urban development, such as Ebenezer Howard's Garden City and the contexts within which they were created, highlight the resilience of the urban issues being dealt in the historical, modern and future world. Furthermore past models due to their sometimes all encompassing nature offer as well a feasible solution to contemporary problems which are increasing in nature and scale, i.e. future issues of note. By way of example, enduring Garden City urbanism, borne more than a century ago has a number of elements similar to those promoted under the canopy of Sustainable Development, i.e. matters now affecting the social, economic and environmental urban futures, and thus has much relevance to agencies or authorities pursuing urban development and betterment. For example, the Garden Cities and Garden Suburbs of the early-1900s have provided accommodat-

ing environments in Britain still valued today by those who live in them. In addition, the idea of human settlements in proximity to nature, has a resonance with Sustainable Development ideas and the creation of 'sustainable communities'. Of meaning too is the Garden City's promotion of community. With a strong enough idea and even with somewhat limited private financial backing Ebenezer Howard, the creator of the Garden City Idea, has shown in real terms how it is possible to 'buy' a better environment which reaches out to all social classes. This holistic view of society is immensely powerful to our vision of integrated metropolitan societies in the future. Consequently given the present nature of Sustainable Development and the future direction of early-21st century urbanism, the Garden City may be seen to display a number of close similarities, including:

- The physical sense of the Garden City. An enduring, adaptive environment that is both carefully shaped (in how the buildings are arranged) and how it is managed.
- The notion of human settlement and nature/the environment together. The sense of accord between man and nature in a major component in the philosophy of Sustainable Development with its explicit direction to the management of future matters.
- The community idea and the sense of social and economic inclusion which is a principle aspect of modern policies regarding the integration of marginalised groups within society, such as the poor. The sense of social integration, the people-centred nature of the Garden City and its proposed creation of a participatory society are fundamental components of policies that today meet the challenges of Sustainable Development in its quest for future urban betterment.
- The Garden City provides a clear example of attention being given to local matters in community development and environmental management with the goals of the idea to be realised with-

in the scope of the existing legal and political system. Localisation issues form a significant part of the philosophy of Sustainability and political sensitivity is significant in the successful implementation of sustainable notions. The Garden City therefore provides a workable model, a flexible and adaptable society that recognises its place within a wider legal, economic and political picture which can adjust to changing future wants, needs and demands.

- It may be argued that the market-based approach to development employed by Ebenezer Howard, in the form of setting up a limited company to oversee the development of the Garden City Idea's manifestation, Letchworth Garden City with its creation of an environmental standard well above that of existing towns and cities, has relevance with private property development which so often is dominated by the acquisition of profit at the expense of environmental and sometimes social affairs.
- The Garden City was an idea that was comprehensive in nature, combining together economic, social and environmental elements so as to achieve its objective of creating a new urban system and more equal opportunity urban society. The Garden City Idea explicitly demonstrates the close relationship between society, the environment and the economy and through the successful practical work undertaken at Letchworth Garden City how these three elements are in real terms intricately linked.
- Howard's idea whether deliberate or not employed features noted in the contemporary context as being democratic planning, which in simple terms equates to urban planning providing benefits of action that do not occur without co-ordination beyond the individual and beyond the short-term, i.e. the long-term, the future.

- The Garden City proposes urbanism to be an asset. Modern metropolisation is increasingly being viewed with such a perspective in that cities are not only seen as fiscal contraptions but as engines of nations and resources to economic competition if managed correctly. Given too that Sustainability is guided by principles such as diversity of life, eradication of poverty, acting on values, peace and security, and providing for greater democratic participation in the decision making process then communities such as British model communities at the end of the 19th century/start of the 20th century offer much to contemporary urbanism and it is no coincidence that urbanists look to the past as a means to guide to the future.

The Move Forward

Predicting future urban trends and cultures is problematic due to the variety of contexts that can rapidly alter urban circumstances. However, if current issues are an indicator of future urban scenarios then a number of tendencies may be noted. Firstly, there is the move initiated by Sustainable Development towards more integrative societies via the reduction of factors that encourage marginalisation of particular social groups, such as the urban poor, which can be achieved through the application of broader than presently employed environmental, housing and transport policies. Social and economic integration of citizens is, and will continue to be, a major element in urban policy thinking. Secondly, due to the combination of political climates supporting tax reductions, the cutting back of public budgets and escalating costs of ill health in many societies caused by modern urban lifestyles, e.g. a lack of exercise, the widespread use of the car, unbalanced diets, smoking, obesity, etc., urban planners, architects, politicians and those involved in public health will have little option but to reconsider the link between the environment and health, just as the British had to in the 1830s and 1840s as a consequence of industrialisation and rapid urbanisation. Such a means of re-examining the link between health and environment can be done, it may be said, through increased professional collaboration, broader professional remits and the adoption of wider approaches to health in the urban situ, e.g. by perhaps adopting socio-economic approaches or redesigning historical concepts to suit present and future contexts. Many health programmes such as those currently undertaken in Europe and Australia, via 'Healthy Cities', 'Walk in to Work out' and 'Fruit Plus' campaigns, for example, are presenting the first steps in this urban re-appriasal by promoting modern urban health through repackaging old medical ideas and practices. As a recent article in the Sydney Morning Herald observed: "public health and planning professions were close allies in the 19th and early 20th century when they worked together to combat disease by improving sanitation in cities. But once water supplies were cleaned up and decent sewerage introduced, urban planning became disconnected from health. Architects and planners designed buildings and cities while doctors treated sick people and the link between the two was lost."[1] Arguably the urban future relies on this readjoinment of health with planning, both in professional and practical policy terms, so as to establish good living environments and healthy lifestyle choices as a right for all. Finally in the light of the fiscal tightening of public budgets, national and municipal authorities will no option but to increase the emphasis on disease prevention as opposed to current often hugely costly treatments. Again, this in part recalls the early-Victorians who introduced housing legislation due to the perceived costs of poor health and the threat it posed to national prosperity, Britain's basic bequest from the Industrial Revolution. Furthermore this preventative process may be additionally encouraged by private companies who presently face a growing threat of legal action due to the scientifically proven association between their products (e.g. tobacco and fast food) and disease.

Conclusion

Although I have only briefly highlighted the British model of trying to solve social problems brought about by change after the onset of economic and industrial development there are many interesting parallels between Victorian life and problems confronted in modern metropolitan centres today and difficulties expected to be faced in the future. How the British dealt with their problems provides not a perfect model but an answer to certain past economic and social disparities recognized as unacceptable today and being dealt with in the future via Sustainable Development practices. Given too the fact that the physical layout of Victorian towns and cities have not a stopped further progress and growth from occurring, and in addition these work considerably well with the newer development, the model has arguably much contemporary significance and much to offer to agents in the urban situ who imminently intend to establish greater social, economic and cultural integration. Whilst historically the British Victorian City has been noted an object of disparagement, an ugly landscape of factories and disease, it is significant for us to think about how will history perceive our modern cities? Will they too be seen as objects of meaning or simply objects of scorn? Thankfully, with the appearance and enlargement of Sustainable Development strategies urban development has not only been re-examined but now offers a sturdy platform from which to anticipate the future so as to ensure the city of tomorrow is not historically judged as being uninviting and unattractive. What's more, as this paper has shown, popular contemporary health schemes that promote better environments standards and lifestyle choices often echo to times gone by. These programmes, which no doubt will be utilised further, tend to show the significance of marrying together the environment and health. As highlighted beforehand, this relationship was once close but became fractured by the evolving professional interests of architects, planners and public health workers during the last century. Therefore if future directions are to be suggested then the reconnection of health and built structures, already established in Sustainable Development practices, will take on further significance in the forthcoming years not only as they offer a means to lessen current social, economic and environmental concerns, but quite simply due to the our common rethinking of history and the successes, not failures, it helped to bring about to people's health and the environments in which they resided.

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Notes

1. The Sydney Morning Hearld, February 3rd 2005, 'If we build it...' by Nick Galvin.