Response Paper #3: Experimental City

Underlying Philosophy

Mankind has forever nourished the dream of planning the perfect city but the gap in the blueprint and the resultant built form has always imbibed the sense of human failings in living in accordance to the prescribed norms (Akkerman, 2000). However, I have always believed that such bemoaning is off the mark because attempts to please everyone often fall short. It is important to identify or appeal to a specific demographic that is united in value ideology. A sense of perfect living is different for each community and that trait often forms the identifying character of a settlement or city. It probably explains why a particular city can be termed liberal or conservative, or why Seattle is active in recycling while Houston is totally apathetic. The spirit of the city, organic or planned is manifested not in the monumental buildings or vast ceremonial spaces but in the value system of the people that inhabit them. I believe that my vision for a city as I describe below will be inhabited by people who firmly believe in the idea of conservation and eco-friendly design. Eco-friendly design can be termed as causing minimum impact on the environment not only during the process of inhabitation by humans but also during an extended period of habitation so that existence is sustainable. The rigors of living in such a city would not be rigors for people devoted to the idea of conservation but in fact be a pleasurable experience. It will result in enhanced feeling of 'giving back to the world that they live in' and the economical benefits are likely to accrue in the long run. The mental well being of our existence is as important as the social and economic factors that determine our choice of a city.

A city perfect, according to me is the city that lives in harmony with its natural environment. Establishing a city in fact is intrusion onto nature's domain however greater our care for conservation might be, and bodes well for everyone concerned if this artificial impact is kept to the minimum (Selman, 1981). Proponents of living in harmony with the environments have abounded in planning literature; as early as Ebenezer Howard's Garden City to the more recent trends in eco-friendly design most notably by Paolo Soleri's Arcosanti Project.

In addition presence of water has always inspired man to establish their biggest settlements on its shores. The connection with water is partly due to sense of connection that man feels with his natural environment and partly due to historical association with regional and international trade. The city that I envision will be identified from the sky (or in a modern context, via Google Earth) as shades of green and blue rather than the dull lifeless grays of concrete and asphalt. Economically and socially, the city will focus on ideas of self-containment as highlighted by many planners; it is an attempt to "create a built form that allows many to live, work, shop and recreate within a community or defined geographical area" (Cervero, 1995). But self-containment will not necessarily mean self-sufficiency but rather mean to limit mobility within the city to prevent auto-dependence (details below).

The Water Factor

Connection with water is as important as the nestling of the city with nature's greens. If possible, the city will be located on the shores of a large water body and water bodies will also be interspersed within the city so that no person is further than ten minutes walk away from the closest contact with water. As proponents of stormwater management will emphasize, nature of water and the subsequent classification into good water/bad water (via Dr. Ming Han Li's talk during the LAUP lecture series) makes a difference in a living experience. Water features in my city will be both interactive, as the fountains in Italian piazzas as well as passive sources of recreation as the Marine Drive promenade along the coastline of South Bombay. The water's edge not only subtly delineates the boundaries between areas of the city but also seek to be the places for congregation. Presence of large number of water bodies also help in keeping the ambient temperature of the region low. Canberra was designed in conjunction with presence of artificial water bodies and it has been a success as much as organic natural lake-cities like Udaipur, India.

Political and Economic Structure

The ideal population for the city I envision is around 100,000-150,000. Exceeding this population will necessitate establishing another central district (described below)

and no means to restrict the growth shall be exercised as long as the general tenets of conservation and sustainability are adhered to. The political structure of the city will center on a city council that draws its members from neighborhood associations. Thus control shall be dispersed and the term shall not last more than one year. The city will *not* host manufacturing and industrial areas especially those that generate significant pollution. It is expected that service economy will form the primary business focus of the city. However, technology oriented, trade, business service companies can locate within the city. The business sector shall not be zoned in one particular area but in fact divided in several districts around the central district of the city. The lower levels of the business districts will be housed by restaurants and pubs that will keep the area active after business hours. The business buildings shall be leased out to the companies and only in special circumstance be private office buildings be permissible. They shall be built in accordance with principles of eco-friendly design and intelligent technology (Sharples, Callaghan, & Graham, 1999). Maximum efficiency of energy shall be the primary factor in the design of the buildings. Other supporting business services such as groceries, electronic stores, clothing stores, etc. shall be dispersed within the city (details in Urban Form and Structure).

University and Research as Magnets

The central district of the city will feature a medium-sized university (15-20,000 students) nestled in a cultural district that houses other public facilities (details below). The university will also host supporting research institutes that will develop innovative environmental-friendly technology. Presence of a university and research institutes that focus on harmony with nature will further nurture the underlying principles of this city. It will also attract a talented pool of resources from other parts of the world that will not only help in reinforcing the economic base of the city but also help propagate its philosophy.

This central district will host a cultural district that houses museums, art galleries, exhibit halls, sports stadia, cinema complex, library, etc. It should be noted that these facilities will be used in conjunction with the city and not be restricted to the

university alone. The university will not be a separate entity but in fact use ancillary facilities that the town uses jointly. The central library will also be the university academic library; similarly for the sports stadia and arenas. This will foster a greater connection between the academia and the community.

The central district will be partly separated from the business district, as described above by a large green belt and water bodies.

Transport

As featured in the Minnesota Experimental City in the early 60s (Glines, 2000), the city will be an "auto-free zone" with cars parked on the edge of the city with 'people-mover' connecting them to the center. The periphery of the city would be connected to the outside world with the national highway system. A network of underground routes would provide for emergency vehicles only and entry to the underground network of horizontal movement will be granted only under extraneous circumstances. This underground network also can be used to transport goods and heavy machinery within the city. Traffic in the underground system will be operated on the technology of automated highway system (AHS) (Congress, 1994).

Exclusion of cars within city limits isn't a novel concept and certain hill stations in India (Matheran, Maharashtra, a hill-station 60 miles from Bombay, etc.) have managed to do just that. Of course, the logistics of applying the limitation to a larger city will be proportionately higher. The primary mode of public transport will be light rail within the city. The light rail will be electric-operated and individual transport will be dominated with two-wheelers traveling under a strict speed limit. Traffic transgressions will be dealt by imposing heavy fines and parking within the city will also be charged heavily. Bicycles however will be excluded from parking charges. This will seek to encourage pedestrian traffic and restrict use of motor transport to the minimum. The emission standards for two-wheelers will be stricter than usual national norms. The proximity of places to work, shop, and recreate will encourage pedestrian movement and discourage use of motorized transport.

Urban Form and Structure

Since the city will be primarily auto-free zone, the settlement will be denser than a typical city. Dense cities are known to be more efficient in terms of supporting infrastructure and consumable energy. “Communities packing 12 or more households per acre are *more efficient* than less-dense communities built with the latest Energy Star appliances and materials” (Cascio, 2005). There is also a substantial proportion of suburban dwellers preferring high-density environments (Schwanen & Mokhtarian, 2004). A typical street will house residential apartments, or lofts atop commercial retail outlets akin to most organic settlements. Infrastructure, of course would lay down the basis for settlement and make the case for urban density - “Many of the more obvious steps that would retrofit sprawl for density -- multi-family housing complexes, better mass transit, higher-efficiency systems for water and power -- are also those needed to make these communities more closely resemble the "bright green" urban ideal” (Cascio, 2005). Also, mixed-use notably residential and retail will eliminate need for big-box retailers that encourage sprawl. Larger stores can be present on the ground level by combining two or more retail establishments but such combinations shall be restricted to only four retail outlets to encourage retail heterogeneity and diversity of retail choices. Also each neighborhood shall be imposed with zoning restrictions to prevent aggregating similar establishments so that each neighborhood is self-contained commercially. People living in mixed-used neighborhoods made at least two to four more walk/bicycle trips per week to retail stores than those served mostly by automobiles (Handy, 1992). This will underline the redundancy of automobiles in the city and make them a liability rather than an asset.

The residential apartments shall be in form of “terrace garden apartments” so that each individual is in touch with green however little space that might be. The terraced apartments also will not tower over the street but rather open up the adjoining street to more light. The rooftops shall be declared ‘green zones’ and fitted with green roof technology (Dimoudi & Nikolopoulou, 2003). Each neighborhood will be clustered around the school and shall be have at least 20% green space allotted for active and

passive recreation. Clustering residential and commercial activity will also give a better sense of security to the neighborhood and lend a sense of vibrancy to the community. The concept of New Urbanism will be prevalent in formulating the basic structure of the neighborhood. The design and look of each neighborhood shall be regulated by a local neighborhood council rather than by the city. However, each neighborhood shall adhere to the basic philosophy of eco-friendly design and pedestrian-friendly sense of place. This will allow each neighborhood to develop its own sense of identity while remaining loyal to the city's ideals.

Concluding Remarks

The evolution of a town (even planned ones) can be likened to the Sagrada Familia Cathedral in Barcelona. Created by Antoni Gaudi, the cathedral has been left unfinished ever since it was started more than 100 years ago. Every time we consider the settlement to be complete, the subsequent generation finds something amiss and adds to it. Although the ideas enumerated in his plan for a town may seem idealistic, I believe that given a sense of commitment, the underlying ideals of remaining faithful to the environment can lessen the footprint of a settlement on the natural habitat. But at the same time, it also remains flexible to changing trends with each passing generation. Like the unfinished cathedral, it remains perpetually in construction but at heart it still retains Gaudi's indelible mark.

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