



20th century planning heritage: pretty theories and ugly practices¹

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Most planning history books tell us of the planning ideas of rebels, anarchists, federalists, visionary architects, religious fundamentalists, journalists and novelists. All this under a genre of royal indifference to the mode of construction of the real city, where billions of us live today. It is not necessary to look to urban utopias for this purpose. We can limit ourselves to analysing some of the main slogans, or should we call them theories, which accompany the 20th century city, such as the garden city, the historic centre, and the global city. At the turn of the 21st century, it is appropriate to reflect on the gap which exists between planning ideas, and their description, their use in marketing the 20th century city and planning ideals they vehicle. Most planning achievements cease to exist as new problems appear.

1. There are different definitions of the 20th century. The shorter period espoused by E. Hobsbawm spanning from 1914 to 1989 and the longer version of Ch. S. Maier sets from 1860 to 1980. The latter is more relevant to planners, because we locate modern planning in this same interval. Such planning is based on land, not on the city form. It is land, urban land, which plays the central role in the great undertaking that is the construction of the industrial city. Reorganisation of urban land is the object of many professions. Land speculation is one of the main forces determining the configuration of the modern city. The task of public authority is to delimit territory, to assign appropriate functions to every parcel, and to ensure to any parcel the certainty of rights and therefore market value. Producing wealth, within the public realm, is up to the private sector. German textbooks, where for the first time urban issues such as circulation, environment, land use- are dealt with systematically, establish the foundations of modern planning. They do it in a more convincing and comprehensive way than the much quoted British town planning acts, which were not that different from the many pre-industrial European urban regulations.
2. Such a disciplinary approach, culminates in an urban master plan, fully coherent with principles of responsibility, enlargement of rights, and definition of territorial and institutional boundaries that characterise the new central Nation-state. In the struggle among professional corporations to get hold of the new operational field, it was the logic of the “scientific” professions that won, especially that of “engineers”, after the first harsh confrontations with medical doctors, surveyors, agronomists, and architects. It went this way in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, where the central States dominate. That kind of systemization became “planning”. It developed more and more as a normative body, within which planning that followed had to adapt.
3. The Planning found in history books, Benevolo, Choay, and Peter Hall, but the list of authors is much longer, indeed entirely different. One of dissent, composed of anarchists, federalists, religious fundamentalists, visionary architects, journalists and novelists. With happy indifference towards the mechanisms of construction (and, at least in part, of control) of the real city, proposals, interpretations, and theories have accumulated to explain what is, and moreover how a contemporary city should be developed. Each time models are introduced they present some common characteristics: they start with a critique of the

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present state and propose solutions to shortcomings so identified. Those models were usually : a) only partially implemented and b) certainly inefficient. The failure is often charged to evil's -ignorance, corruption, and incompetence - inherent in a society that does not make use of its experts. Those models all of them still existent were actually forced to contend with realities quite different from the illusory ones. I will discuss the reason for this situation . Let's leave the many urban utopias of the 18th and 19th century even if all disciplinary inventories start from here. Let's limit ourselves to the 20th century and its slogans, should we call them theories? Let's take three of the main ones: the garden city, the global (or world) city, the historic city.

4. In 1879 Jules Verne described a model city that, started from hygienic principal and ended up looking pretty much like a garden city: collective land, single family houses, low density, a network of small social services, lots of trees and open space, the contrary model is the compact, high density city. This type city where no apparent conflicts exist , where inhabitants live free from tensions and troubles typical of contemporary urban life, is described in term akin to those characterising an American suburb, an empyrean place for the middle class, a monument to social, economic, ethnic, cultural, etc. segregation. In such a city, an aggregation of highways, are used at an average speed of 15 miles per hour during ever lengthening peak hours. These highways end up in pleasant, twisted, tree-lined little boulevards, providing a setting for the most dejected stories of Raymond Carver. Typically, the identification of the community with place is transferred to ever more restricted communities in ever more confined places. This is where the myth of the garden city ends. The garden suburb, in which the American dream finds its highest spatial expression, has already become, like everything that comes directly from the Empire, a model for many imitations, whether from the compounds for the corrupted African élite to tourist villages (which have massacred the Mediterranean coast, from Spain to Turkey, to France and Italy and have even started to penetrate the Caribbean). Typical of the tourist industry, what is sold is the exclusiveness, that is the exclusion of others rather than the charm of the environment. As such the community of the garden city of Howardian descent, like the neighbourhood unit of Clarence Perry and Lewis Mumford, has lost any semblance of solidarity, but rather exudes offers the tough exterior look of power.
5. Take the global city, an obvious product of the globalisation. The Habitat Agenda of Istanbul 1996, sings the praises of economic globalisation, with moving innocence as an extraordinary chance for growth, when combined with local sustainable development strategies. Hailing the free market as the superior model, planners and experts from every discipline point to the new prospects for a city where the public sector, which in this case is called "government" or "state", divests itself of its main assets, production companies: gas, light or service companies: transportation, assistance to the people, etc. to the private sector, referred to here as "the community". This trend is unavoidable today as a result of a long history in inefficiency of the public sector, producing an increase in the quantity and sometimes, not always, in the quality of product and or service. Nobody would deny the splendour of the new developments in the business districts of London, Sao Paulo or Kuala Lumpur, the increase in the GNP of a number of once poor Asiatic countries, the rise of new jobs in areas once marked by famine and out-migration. But even planners should be able to see the heavy social costs of globalisation in the so called global cities, not to mention those further afield . Consideration should be given, that according to UN indicators incomes are extremely unequal both in Africa and in the industrialised countries. How the split between the rich and the poor has become visible, how difficult it is to circulate in cities where people are strangers and hostile to each other, for fear of troubles of all kinds . Citizens call for more police, and quite often the police are violent and corrupt,

urban security is a social and political issue to the point of having an enormous impact on the real estate market. While streets turn into deserted areas, shopping malls become more successful due to a nice feeling of security provided by a numerous private police. Crystal and gold buildings in financial districts cannot hide the reduction in the quality of life from what we were used to. Social mobility is hampered by unequal access to information and education because of the diminished role of the state and its redistribution powers. The outcome is an increasing fragmentation of the city, both in social and spatial terms. In some section of the city environmental policies go as far as prohibiting cigarettes as well as cars in the streets while elsewhere the informal economy produces the most unhealthy surroundings. Is the Global city the answer? I doubt it.

6. The concept of historic centres is born out of the of modern industrial cit its new size and rate of growth put strong pressure on the old core. Rising land values, together with (or hiding behind) hygienic and functional reasons provide the background for a systematic renewal of the old historic fabrics. It took more than a century for society to acknowledge the “historic” value of the old urban fabric, even when lacking important “monuments”. As a matter of fact, only in the last decades has the idea of preserving historic centres been accepted by the society as a whole, rather than just by intellectuals at the avant-garde of the process. Citizens began to appreciate historic centres for what was missing in the contemporary city: the amount and measure of public space for social exchange and representation, building types that although similar remain individually recognisable, with presence of people strolling in the streets, not the huge crowds in the stadiums, nor the desert of the modern periphery. In short, the historic fabric went back into the market to the point of becoming a status symbol. Some results have been achieved: the concept of conservation is today not only universally accepted, as in the wealthy Europe, but it has also broadened its horizon so as to include the 19th and early 20th century as well as the entire landscape. More generally put, it can be said that the historic dimensions of our spatial environment has become part of daily life. Meanwhile, development in the tourist industry, especially in some of the main components -cultural and religious tourism- seem to provide the resources necessary to implement conservation policies. However this evolution has a cost. Ground floors are turned into shops, first floors into restaurants (with many interchanges taking place between the two. Furthermore, streets and squares are equipped with seats for the elderly and play stations for children to permit adults to perform their shopping duties. A co-mingling of the crowd occurs in these spaces: visitors, lunch-time employees but, overall, mostly buyers. What kind of city is this now? It turns out to be exactly the opposite of what we were looking for: a city where different kinds of people as well as different kinds of activities could share the same space, where the space would identify a community of interests and values, where all this was expressed in a coherent sequence of private and public buildings, where there would be a large provision of public space, rich social interchange and above all a strong local identity. Instead exploitation occurs due to an overwhelming process of homogenisation in terms of pervasive commercial activity, where what is being sold is actually produced throughout the world and local images become nothing more than advertising icons. Local folk are pushed out by rising prices, oriented towards international tourism or forced to leave by newcomers looking for more “prestigious” quarters and by all the inconveniences brought-on by tourist congestion. Instead of saving the diversity of the central historic districts, they have been absorbed into the general schemes of contemporary cities, reducing them to mono-functional zones, the very arrangement people are trying to escape.
7. Why is there so much bias in our literature, once taken to be ideology? Obviously writers reflect more common attitudes, be it that of scholars or of society in general. They

emphasise nice feelings and comfortable thoughts that have accompanied the development of our contemporary cities. Still they try to put some distance between some thinkers or researchers and other actors on the urban scene. The latter are responsible for many poor results, in terms of the living environment, and intellectuals would excuse themselves as having been ignored prophets. Some would have it that if planners are right, society is wrong, its just that simple. Such an attitude has been maintained for a long time by professional planners, in fact it has not entirely disappeared, this might explain the extraordinary number of useless master plans imposed on the urban world. However, while complaining, most planners were working on a daily basis, designing our contemporary spatial patterns and regulations. When people started to realise how detrimental such a schizophrenic attitude was, even planners started to rethink their own role in the spatial process. They now talk of themselves as mediators, as facilitators of development, in its many aspects, not only spatial but also environmental, economic, and social. They recognise that many other actors have or should have a say in construction space. In the attempt at being neutral in facilitating the process they appear to give up the ethical roots of their own discipline. Is this one more intellectual evasion?

8. To go back to where I started, what to me appears to be lacking is a radical reflection on the manner in which to build a contemporary city, without preconceived ideological excuses. What should be taken into consideration is that the construction of our space is in fact an terrific undertaking that involved enormous changes in economy social values, behaviour, aesthetic perception and political attitudes. Planners played a minor role in it, but their voice was sometimes significant also because they were involved in the mainstream operations, and their dissent, if any, had the seal of professional expertise. But that dissent was based on ethical principles. Why should this not be so today? How are we going to accommodate an urban population which is supposed to double in the next 25 years? Can we think of a realistic as well as satisfactory ways to perform the task?