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Cold War, Hot Climate: City Planning In Times of Crisis

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Abstract

In the face of looming environmental crises, most notably global climate change, many urban planners are striving to reinvent the city for long-term sustainability. Another period in American planning history was equally, if not more, doom-laden: the early years of the Cold War, when humanity faced, for the first time, the prospect of self-annihilation. In the crisis of the atomic age, postwar planners found a compelling argument for rebuilding America’s cities as spacious, healthy communities distributed throughout the countryside, away from the dangerous, vulnerable old cities. This paper examines relevant themes from this historical crisis that are of interest for our own era, as we seek to identify ways of not only building sustainable cities, but in establishing a sustainable civilization.

Introduction

There is a growing consensus that climate change represents one of the greatest challenges to the project of civilization we have ever faced. Not only would abrupt climate change be ecologically devastating, it threatens, depending on its extent, to be a significant new source of conflict (Schwartz and Randall 2003). In order that some of the causes and consequences of this threat may be partially addressed, the urban planning literature has in recent years promoted various schemes for “sustainable cities” (see Birch & Wachter; Roseland). The form of the city is seen as a vital means of reducing pollution, natural resource and energy consumption and the production of greenhouse gases.

Yet conceptions of the sustainable city and sustainable development in general have come under some criticism, not so
much in terms of their practical merits but rather for their ideological deficiencies and the uncritical way in which they are often received and discussed.

Atkinson (2007) notes that, owing to the profound distributive and social equity issues at stake, "there are philosophical/moral issues to be considered...before it is possible to think of physical (planning) solutions" (p. 203).

The threat that dramatic climate change poses to our global civilization is such that we need to consider whatever ameliorative measures we can. However, because spatial planning intimately connects to multiple levels of social and power relations it is essential that changes to the city undertaken under the exigencies of crisis are done in such a way as to avoid to the extent possible social injustice and other unanticipated negative consequences.

Historical precedent offers some guidance. In the years following World War II, a similarly influential city planning discourse promoted urban and regional planning solutions intended to address another terrible threat to national security. "Defensive dispersal" planning looked to urban form to defend America from nuclear attack (summarized in Dudley 2001). The city was to be transformed from a major strategic weakness to a core element in America’s civil defense program.

This paper will outline the problematic nature of the "sustainable city." Then the tenets of the historical defensive dispersal movement will be summarized, using literature appearing in scholarly and practitioner planning journals published in the 1940s and 1950s. The parallels and divergences between these planning models will then be discussed. Finally, the paper will consider how the themes identified through this historical case can inform planning for not only sustainable cities, but also a sustainable civilization.
First, however, we shall establish the necessary lens for this analysis by examining how societies respond to risk.

**Planning, Risk and “Colonizing the Future”**

Beck (1999) defines planning for risk as an “attempt to colonize the future” (p. 3). Such colonization may be especially problematic when the threats are as grave as those considered here. As Gunder (2006) points out, in spite of seemingly irresolvable threats, governments are compelled to “exorcise” them through planning:

(R)isk is a fear of the undecidable and unknown, which inherently haunts society as a spectre seeking exorcism... [and] a response to this cultural fear, or haunting, and its desired resolution, results in the constant seeking of an impossible absoluteness of knowledge to provide, or at least give the illusion of, certainty towards a safe tomorrow – a core tenet of planning (p. 186-7).

Clarke (1999) also speaks of illusion in planning. Organizations often formulate plans that are based on untestable and unrealistic assumptions, have little hope of being implemented in real-life situations, and are so far removed from reality that Clarke calls them “fantasy documents.” Their value, he claims, is purely rhetorical, in that they are intended to impart a sense of rationality, expertise and control on the part of their authors. The dangers in question, once planned for, are hence normalized, and the intended audience is led to believe that the risks under consideration are ultimately acceptable ones (Clarke 1999).

The authors of risk-oriented plans are unlikely to be aware that this symbolism is not just serving rhetorical ends but in fact may disguise far more grave and unnameable threats which lie outside acceptable discourse. As Gunder (2008) observes:
Articulatable risks are at best the incomplete illusions produced in symbolic representation to cover, or engage with, the symptoms of the Real that cannot be articulated – repressed or never known hauntings from that which must always lack words (p. 196).

Attempts on the part of governments and policy analysts in the early years of the Cold War to normalize nuclear weapons (see Boyer 1985) could certainly be deemed “incomplete illusions.” For example, civil defense programs were once promoted to give Americans “a more healthy attitude towards atomic warfare” (Lapp 1949 p. 161). Such antiseptic attempts at rationality could not successfully hide the sheer irrationality of the prospect of “living with the Bomb,” resulting in a widespread combination of confusion, resignation and ambivalence that contributed to the failure of civil defense planning (McEnaney 2000).

If Gunder and Clarke are correct, and that planning for risk is often rhetorical and symbolic, we must wonder if current planning campaigns aimed at shifting us towards “sustainable” urbanism, are similarly disguising unnameable “symptoms of the real.” As we shall see, the entire project of urban sustainability has been subject to a great deal of controversy that is not commonly acknowledged by its advocates.

**Problematicizing the “Sustainable City”**

The connections between climate change, urban form and sustainability have been the subject of a rich literature, and planners are being exhorted to apply their efforts to addressing them. Sustainability is seen as “a broadly accepted norm” that is considered “to be in everybody’s interest” (Bauriedl and Wissen 2002, 109). Sustainability has become one of our era’s most deeply embedded planning meta-narratives.

Yet some critics worry that our rush to embrace and building forms, through processes and technologies labelled “green,” may result in uncritical city-building and leave underlying and dysfunctional socio-political processes unaddressed. As Peter
Marcuse observed (1998) “sustainability is not enough,” and indeed is, strictly speaking, not even desirable, as the conditions of the poor both “cannot be sustained [and] should not be sustained” (p. 106).

An especially common fault with this discourse, according to Guy & Marvin (1999), is its “singular” vision of what a sustainable city would look like, and reducing these to a list of so-called “best practices” – the realization of which requires a prescribed set of technological advances which are regarded with “determinist and celebratory” praise (p. 270). Architect Jeffrey Inaba sees in this lack of scrutiny a resulting tendency towards “regressive urban environments” (Manaugh 2007). As well, Guy & Marvin (1999) note that an uncritical emphasis on technological solutions brings with it a narrow conception of contemporary social relations.

Sustainable city discourse is also criticized for its sheer inadequacy in the face of the actual threats facing humanity. Adrian Atkinson warns in a monumental three-part series in City (2007-8) that we are facing nothing short of societal collapse when globalization breaks down as energy supplies dwindle, forcing a dramatic reduction in scale of all human activities. Yet, he argues, all attempts to articulate a “sustainable city” have failed to meet the challenges he describes.

Atkinson shows how sustainable city discourse has emerged from an Occidental worldview of progress that mediates against the adherence to natural limits. All current trends, he believes, point to an exhaustion of fossil-based energy sources and an inexorable collapse of modern society. A few generations following such a collapse might render unrecognizable any vestige of our civilization as we know it, a fate for which the sustainability discourse has done little to prepare us (Atkinson 2007a, 2007b, 2008).
In the face of such doom-laden prophecies, it would seem appropriate that we now turn to a potentially useful precedent of the sustainable city: the city of defensive dispersal.

Planning for the Atomic Age

City planners in the early years of the Cold War believed they could lend their expertise in an effort to stave off nuclear disaster. Having long believed the congested industrial city was a threat to the public good, they now saw it as a threat to national security as well. In the crisis of the atomic age they found a new and compelling argument for rebuilding America’s cities as spacious, healthy communities distributed throughout the countryside. Working alongside military scientists, social scientists and policy analysts, urban planners contributed to a significant literature on “defensive dispersal” (summarized in Dudley 2001).

In his 1948 article “The dispersal of cities as a defense measure,” urban planner Tracy Augur argued that if metropolitan areas were designed to maintain their primary economic and productive functions after being atom-bombed, then such an attack is unlikely; but if a city is congested and vulnerable, it will not only invite such an attack, but could then do little “to support the retaliatory action needed for final victory” (Augur 1948, 30). For Augur, the form of America’s cities was “a matter of national concern, to be set by the mandates of national welfare rather than the whims of individual builders” (ibid, 29).

The most frequently proposed means of accomplishing these objectives included the construction of satellite cities surrounded by greenbelts (dubbed firebreaks). Also, a huge investment in expressways and slum clearance was advocated. With the residents of congested cities decanted to satellite cities, older cities could then be demolished to be replaced with vast open areas that would, in addition to their aesthetic virtues, also act as firebreaks.
Despite the grim subject at hand the dispersal literature is replete with highly modernist optimism. Norton (1951) for example, states that “there is no man-made problem which the ingenuity of man cannot solve” (p. 89), while Lapp (1951) argued that “every weapon of mass destruction can be defeated with space” (p. 76). In keeping with such beliefs, many proposed solutions border on technological determinism. For example, Lapp earlier (1949) opined that the “same technology that developed the bomb should be able to solve the problems of this social revolution and lead the nation to a better and safer way of life” (pp. 157-8).

While Lapp (1949) and others would propose quite radical solutions for urban form (such as radial and linear cities), many of the provisions were merely efforts to promote and accelerate emerging trends towards decentralization, and other long sought changes to America’s cities. As such, some argued from a position of inevitable logic:

The expressways would have to be built...if our large cities are not to choke to death in their own traffic; the slums would have to be cleared sooner or later...new factories, homes and stores would be built anyway (Monson & Monson 1951a p. 249)

Between inevitability and urgency, dispersal became something of conventional wisdom in postwar American planning, to the extent that many planners were apparently citing the defense angle as a “political expedient in order to get something done at a time when few will listen to any proposal that is not labelled defense” (Klaber 1951 p. 73).

Despite this ubiquity, writing on defensive considerations in planning petered out in the 1960s as unrest and social turmoil drove new urban security concerns (discussed in Light 2003).
Discussion

The urban models under discussion here diverge significantly in their purposes and natures. Yet we can see some similar intentions among their respective proponents. Like the latter-day sustainable city, the dispersed city was seen as cleaner, more liveable, and preferable to existing building patterns. Both movements situate well-planned cities as a form of salvation from the greatest threats of their times. Just as the orderly dispersal of America’s cities was once expected to turn the “awful threat” of the bomb into “a great blessing” (Monson & Monson 1951b p. 111), so, too, will the sustainable city “save the Earth” (Register 2009).

Yet, despite this strategic similarity, the nature of the threats in question is radically different. The existence of nuclear weapons was the result of political and technological forces, and, while intersecting with natural processes through radioactive contamination, was primarily an anthropogenic threat. Climate change, by contrast, is the result of multidimensional and complex interaction of natural processes which have been accelerated by human activities. Dispersal planning was therefore always positioned in terms of its ability to thwart the actions of other human beings, rather than forces of nature, while the various proposals for a sustainable city are intended to more holistically integrate human with natural processes.

Following Clarke (1999) we should understand these strategies for their rhetorical value. Dispersal discourse was explicitly aimed at boosting public morale to support the war effort, so was fundamentally about shaping public behaviour. “Green” city proposals, too, are oriented to achieving normative behaviours, particularly by reducing the need for automobiles. However, instead of trying to outwit a distant enemy we are essentially seeking to outwit ourselves.

Furthermore, Gunder (2006, 2008) would urge us to examine the claims of planners for their unintended effects in terms of disguising more fundamental threats that lie outside of
acceptable discourse. Such motivations are apparent in dispersal plans, which would seek to use the physical form of the city to normalize nuclear warfare, while disguising its terrible reality (discussed further in Dudley 2007).

Similarly, do the discourses surrounding urban sustainability disguise what its actual demands will be? Do images of dense, pleasant “green” cities with pedestrians and cyclists making their way between lush rooftop gardens and solar panels merely promote a non-threatening and comfortably bourgeois futurism that avoids discussing what radical alterations to our entire globalized society might actually be needed to prevent dramatic climate change?

Dispersal literature is also characterized by an almost unrelieved instrumentality: The only real goal was to render a Soviet attack ineffective, with no broader goal or purpose for American society. The city and its undifferentiated inhabitants are seen as purely functional and abstract, without meaningful reference to the complex interplay of social, institutional, cultural, economic, political, artistic and spiritual forces - those elements that constitute a civilization.

The sustainable city, too, is also often described as a suite of technologies, designs and associated behavioural changes without arguing for fundamental structural changes to the broader political economy. Such narrow instrumentality may allow us to avoid facing more terrible truths – the “symptoms of the Real that cannot be articulated” (Gunder 2008). Just as dispersal planning took no account of the reality of post-apocalyptic conditions, Atkinson (2007-2008) also believes that sustainable city discourse has failed to address the very real possibility of societal collapse and the means by which civilizing processes may be preserved into such a future.
However, the very nature of our global civilization may impede our ability to both preserve it and address the climate crisis it engendered.

Conclusion: Towards a Sustainable Civilization

In his book *Macro History*, Lee Daniel Snyder describes civilization as a culture-system...in a continuous process of 1) preserving...the integrity of its shared behaviour patterns, against internal disintegration...and 2) adapting its structures to changing historical circumstances (p. 50).

The crisis of climate change is a result of historical and contemporary global civilizational arrangements that enable some broadly shared behaviour patterns (e.g., a culture of industrialized mass consumption) that are quite incapable of being sustained indefinitely. Our “culture-system” cannot both preserve such behaviours and survive; nor can it “adapt its structures” to the “changing historical circumstances” of climate change without meaningfully disrupting these “shared behaviour patterns.”

How, then, can our “Culture-System” be made more sustainable? Will the transition to a post-carbon society be achieved through more sustainable city-building, or will it need to involve a reappraisal of the nature of our civilization?

I suggest that if our efforts to “colonize the future” are to be viable, they must, following Guy & Marvin (1999), be much more modest in their claims for the sustainable city (p. 272). While the prescriptions for the sustainable city are indeed important and essential components of a sustainable future, they do not, in and of themselves, comprise the ingredients of a sustainable civilization.

In his forward to the book *Natural Advantage of Nations* (Hargroves & Smith 2005), Atkinson sets out his principles for a sustainable civilization: the complete redevelopment of our
energy systems, building technologies, and agriculture as well as the preservation of the world’s remaining species and ecosystems in the context of long-lasting international peace (Atkinson 2005). Yet, are not these principles, while admirable, in themselves insufficient for creating a successful civilization? Indeed, given the revolutionary nature of these prescriptions, an already successful civilization – one with sufficiently sustainable social, political and economic structures – would be a prerequisite for carrying them out.

Derrick Jensen, in his massive two-volume book *Endgame* (2006) holds that civilizations cannot, in fact, be sustainable—or, indeed, redeemed. Every aspect of what we refer to as civilization is in his view merely a form of violence and domination and therefore must be “brought down” by whatever means necessary before it destroys the global biosphere and with it, humanity.

In his classic 1961 book *The City in History*, Lewis Mumford acknowledged these violent “unbuilding” tendencies inherent in metropolitan civilization, but he stressed that the will to dominate and exterminate that originally came with the institution of kingship and forms of political hierarchy have always coexisted with life-affirming reciprocal relationships, spiritual aspirations, arts and learning. These contradictions are expressed in the web of our social, religious, economic, political and, yes, spatial arrangements.

Therefore, any vision for a sustainable civilization must address this contradiction directly, and not be confined solely to spatial planning and technological considerations. For, while spatial patterns can impose constraints on these arrangements, they are not synonymous with them.

In the city of defensive dispersal we can see how our culture tried to plan for a grave, unknowable and essentially permanent threat. Yet, its prescriptions failed on their own terms because they essentially divorced the city from the currents of
civilization and thus made impossible the articulation of alternate political arrangements. If we are to have a truly sustainable civilization, these currents and arrangements must be more vigorously contemplated, articulated and pursued.

In Snyder’s (1999) definition of civilization we may discover a useful model: that of a resilient civilization “adapt[ing] its structures to changing historical circumstances” (p. 50) – provided that such structures are not comprised merely of mortar and stone.

Bibliography


“Does safety lie in dispersal?...yes.” *Progressive Architecture* (September), 75.


