Success for whom? The place of people in 21st century cities

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Introduction

Defining the success of cities in any century, let alone one as young as the present century, is a complex matter. We have come to learn that simplistic criteria and a reliance on common sense bring about urban settings that fail major segments of the human population. Design fads, economic assumptions, politics-driven decisions, and private-sector prerogatives all embody arguable logic, and they are convincing in the eyes of their beholders. Yet, each such set of objectives for urban development is but an encapsulated subset of the complex reality and diverse interests that cities embody inevitably.

The Ekistic Grid developed by Constantine Doxiadis was intended as a scheme for use in classifying research and knowledge. Its vertical columns represented increasing sizes of human groupings pertinent to human settlement, while the horizontal rows represented the elements of built environment which come to play with human groupings. Together, these dimensions form a complex matrix containing a multitude of interlocking considerations about human settlements. Developing human settlements on the logic of only one box would be clearly shortsighted. The legacy of Doxiadis and Ekistics for successful urban development is the search for dynamic processes that properly reflect the complex interaction of the many parts necessarily comprising the whole. Some people, myself included, refer to this complex, interdisciplinary, applied, interactive approach to human contexts as Social Ecology. But whatever you call it, the matter of how one defines and accomplishes successful urban development involves more than simple, encapsulated mantras.

Toward social ecology

The Ekistic Grid, like the Ekistics movement more generally, came in response to a growing appreciation a half century ago that human considerations were of low priority in many if not most cities. The industrial revolution brought about cities in which success was evidenced by smoke. Cities of business were (and often continue to be) guided by the economic principles of "highest and best use of land," whereby the most legitimating criterion for land-use allocation is the extent of profit to be made on a given site. Housing was viewed as an economic commodity, rather than a basic human need; it was only from that starting point that practitioners could justify a highly unproductive and unrealistic "trickle-down" theory, rather than concentrating on the growing, overt housing needs of the poor and working classes as human beings.

● The Ekistics movement was reinforced by a variety of emerging perspectives and theories, still many years ago. The Swedish geographer, Torsten Hägerstrand, presented a major address to the Regional Science Association in 1969 called "What about people in regional science?" (HÄGERSTRAND, 1970). This paper provided new and fruitful conceptual tools, reflecting people's use of time and space, to understand how the location and organization of urban infrastructure provides constraints in how people can lead their daily lives. It enabled an additional mode of planning thought – a desirable complement to conventional modes.

● In Britain, at the very same time, a sociologist, R.E. Pahl (1970) published a book called *Whose City?* including an essay by the same name. Pahl's contribution was to state clearly how little planners' objectives reflected the diversity of the urban population. Development plans made winners and losers in the population in nonrandom fashion relating to class and ethnicity. Pahl drew heavily from similar work and conclusions from Herbert Gans' work (1968) in the United States, on central city and suburban residents.

● Considerable attention was accorded the place of people in cities from the late 1960s and 1970s. Architecture and planning curricula incorporated user needs and other human concerns more fully, and academic subjects such as Environmental Psychology, Person-Environment Relations, and Social Ecology took shape. New professional associations such as the Environmental Design Research Association were formed, and new journals and books reflected new approaches to the development of built environments.

● Yet, by the last decade of the 20th century – and despite all the expansion in academic thinking and research, it was not clear that developmental forces had created a place for the sensitive consideration of people in their processes. Logan and Molotch (1987) wrote a prize-winning book in which they developed the concept of the *urban growth machine*. They noted the similarity of developmental planning in American cities, emphasizing in most cases the creation of new entertainment complexes, recreational facilities, and convention centers and hotels for affluent visitors, rather than, for example, a wide range of facilities and services for the resident population. They attribute an advocacy of such directions, regard-

less of the nature, history, and problems of particular cities, to a typical coalition of persuasive interest groups for which upscale leisure facilities are profitable. This includes banks, credit unions, pension funds, the hospitality sector, construction unions, developers, and city politicians (concerned with the economic base). Such coalitions typically sidestep existing problems in their hope that upscaling will work, though existing problems potentially stymie the new plans. The regularity and reasons for this kind of developmental initiative lead to the use of the term, urban growth *machine*.

● More recent work within sociology has termed such a trend as the Disneyfication of American cities and as the creation of a so-called fantasy city (ZUKIN, 1991; GOTTDIENER, 2001; HANNIGAN, 1998).

● Similarly, a new fad in suburban development, dubbed the new urbanism (DUANY, 2000), is similarly myopic. This very well known phenomenon involves the creation of new suburban towns, at sites well removed from the increasing cross-section of the population living in conventional suburbs, with architecture reminiscent of prior ages imagined to be graceful and socially pleasant, and containing an affluent population supporting mutually beneficial institutions. This kind of new urbanism is overtly antithetical to the needs of most contemporary urbanites, due to its specificity, cost, and separatism.

Recent contributions

Nevertheless, despite the reincarnation of limited thinking in new forms – and the lack of widespread adoption of the people-oriented developments of the 1960s and 1970s – there have been important contributions within the social sciences in recent years that are available to anyone seeking a broad basis for developing successful cities in the 2lst century. Let me describe some of these.

Public vs. Private

Both Glen Yago (1984) and David Popenoe (1985) have described the nature and consequences of city infrastructure and transportation planning that favor personal rather than collective facilities. An obvious example is the priority given in some cities to roads and highways for widespread automobile usage in contrast to public transportation. But the distinction between public and private extends to issues of concentration and deconcentration for housing, to mixed versus segregated land uses, and to the balance between universal, public recreation and culture as against commercialization. Popenoe uses the terms "private pleasure" and "public plight" to denote recent trends, which he feels work to the considerable disadvantage of low income groups. If public policy fosters enjoyment based on the ability to pay, those who can't pay, can't enjoy.

The responsibilities of the public sector are an issue, more generally. Municipalities exist because they provide a series of services for the geographic areas of cities that no one else characteristically chooses to do at that scale. The private sector logically performs tasks that turn a profit. Public safety, public health, child care, licensing, elementary education, libraries, commuter transportation, and many more activities cannot hope to maintain high standards and yet make money for investors. Municipalities have increasingly stepped in as needs became apparent. Recent political currents have focused on the reduction of public spending, while either privatizing functions or running them *like* a business. The events of September 11 reinforce the old-fashioned assumptions that public services are of crucial importance for urban populations, not least for those unable to purchase vital services for themselves.

Service-dependent districts

Deinstitutionalization is a trend of the past 20 years, in which big, public institutions such as mental hospitals and prisons have been shut down, to be replaced by smaller units closer to the life of communities. The positive theory behind deinstitutionalization is that residents of these institutions are more likely to integrate into normal society if allowed to be closer to it sooner. Confinement in a totally controlled, entirely separate world is contrary to goals of subsequent good, productive citizenship. The enthusiasm of governments to adopt deinstitutionalization is that they could save money by doing so and then not providing extensive services to assist former residents in the community. Local communities, however, have not been uniformly eager to host special housing for former mental health patients or prisoners in their midst. And the kinds of "outpatient" services required for these people are not uniformly distributed throughout cities. Therefore, the de facto deinstitutionalization policies within many cities have fostered the flooding of service-dependent populations into specific areas in cities, with a destabilizing influence on the original population. Local areas become stigmatized during such processes, making the stability of these areas even more difficult (DEAR and WOLCH, 1987). It is not difficult to understand how the upscaling of some areas can be related to the destabilization of others.

Environmental justice

Furthermore, areas with disadvantaged groups unable to exercise political control have been targeted for the siting of locally-unwanted land uses (lulus). Much American research has indicated that disagreeable and toxic waste sites have been disproportionately located near minority group concentrations by conscious decisions in both the private and public sectors. This has provoked a movment referred to as environmental justice (cf. COLE and FOSTER, 2001; ROBERTS and TOFFOLON-WEISS, 2001).

Place matters

Quite apart from the conscious locational decision making implicit in environmental injustice, a renaissance of research on the importance in people's lives of the local areas in which they live has occurred. Some of this has been specifically environmental – living in the shadow of contamination and risk more generally. Such exposure has been shown related to a series of personal impacts of a social-psychological nature, such as perceived loss of control and stress (EDELSTEIN, 1988). In other situations, overt health risks are paramount (FITZPATRICK and LaGORY, 2000). Other work has focused more on people's isolation in local areas in social concentrations with other primarily disadvantaged people and with less than satisfactory institutions and support structures, be they schools, hospitals, or other organizations (cf. DREIER, MOLLENKOPF, and SWANSTROM, 2001). These studies take the view that, even at a time when some segments of the population are liberated by electronic means of communication and information flow, others remain heavily dependent for their life chances and well-being on their immediate surroundings. If developmental policies address only the top end of the market, they are tacitly fostering distress at other levels.

Concluding remarks

I do not want to leave the impression that sociologists and other social scientists are sovereign or complete in their undertakings and understandings. Nor is there any lack of merit in

the approaches taken by other participants in the urban scene. While I may not value highly every approach in Economics, there is no denying that economic value is a highly powerful force in development. Nonetheless, the success of cities in the 21st century requires attention on how alternative developmental considerations impact on the diverse segments of their resident populations. The interests of only some segments cause dysfunctional outcomes for the entire city when they disadvantage other segments. Societies suffer too much polarization as it is. The scale of cities offers more potential control in the interests of its citizens than does any other level of government, and citizens feel that this is the case (MICHELSON, 1997). Municipalities exist for the common good. If managed accordingly throughout this century, we might hope for more success on behalf of a wider range of people.

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