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## The Challenge to New Cities of the Late Twentieth Century

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Charles SCOTT

### **The Challenge to New Cities of the Late Twentieth Century**

Wyzwanie rzucone wielkim miastom końca XX wieku

As we move into the twenty-first century our cities are evolving according to cultural and political changes. The majority of urban business activity is no longer found primarily within the city center, but instead, is increasingly moving to the fringes of the city where rent and property values are relatively low. There are several causes for these changes ranging from a search for better living conditions, by the inhabitants of the city — to a search for economic benefits by corporations and individuals.

In the United States there is a prevailing notion among the general public that cities in general are perhaps are perhaps, "un-American".<sup>1</sup> This is seen with the continuous development of the outlying urban areas while the urban center, in numerous cities, has a general history of unrelenting decay.

Furthermore, the advancement of information technology has allowed the worker to change her/his workplace from a central business location to the convenience of the home or a location remote from the urban center. This has decreased the traditional need for all employees to be located at the central business headquarters. This change has reinforced the evolution of cities into a metropolis conglomeration with multiple urban centers, each claiming recognition and autonomy.

These large agglomerations are often not in the best interest of the city or of the individual. Previous attempts to develop design schemes for better urban conditions usually have entailed a plan for breaking-up the urban agglomeration. "Suggestions have been made as to how

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<sup>1</sup> W. H. Whyte Jr.: *Are Cities Un-American? The Exploding Metropolis*, Doubleday Anchor Books, Garden City—New York 1957.

the break-up of the city is to be accomplished. Differing as they do in details, it is significant that they possess one tendency in common — the urge toward the organic, which has become increasingly strong in our time as a kind of self-protection against the evils of civilization. (...) One suggestion is that instead of concentrating the population in gigantic blown-up agglomerations, the whole country should be colonized in small tracks (...) Such a decentralization would change us from city dwellers to country dwellers... which would maintain a balance between rural and industrial occupation".<sup>2</sup>

This most likely led to an increase in need and interest concerning the development of the city in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. One influential theory — which had been developed in Great Britain — was Ebenezer Howard's Garden City. Howard's notion of a new city contained three main points which appear to have influenced American designers. Those points consisted of the concept of the town-country magnet, increased spaciousness, and dispersal of towns around a central urban area.

1. Town-Country. Developing the notion of the town-country magnet would be provision of the advantages of both town and country: a populated center limited and surrounded by a larger agricultural zone, bringing ready made markets of the town to the farmer and the delights of the country within quick reach of the town-dweller. Not a town in the country, and certainly not a garden suburb, but an entity of town-country in permanent combination.

2. Spaciousness. In 'this fortunately-placed community' there would be for all, not just a select affluent few, 'ample sites for homes, ample space for roads... so wide and spacious that sunlight and air may freely circulate, and in which trees, shrubs, and grass give the town a semi-rural appearance.'

3. Dispersal of Towns. A leap frogging of cities would mean that 'in the course of time, we should have a cluster of cities grouped around a central city. Here Howard's 'Social Cities' anticipated satellite towns'.<sup>3</sup>

The utilization of Howard's notion of the garden city had been most prevalent in the mid-western United States where mid-west architects and urban designers were inspired by the nineteenth century Arts and Craft movement. This was influential to the developed notion of a Prairie Style architecture and embraced the concept of the single family home within a country setting.

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<sup>2</sup> S. Giedion: *Space, Time and Architecture*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1978, p. 820.

<sup>3</sup> N. T. Newton: *Design on the Land. The Development of Landscape Architecture*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1976, p. 454—455.

One of the most prominent of the Prairie Style architects, Frank L. Wright, developed a theoretical city design based on the notion of Garden City. Wright's Broadacre City accepted the notion that the ideal American home should exist in a country setting. "The form of Broadacre City has no center; it is designed without hierarchy, without zoning, without specialization... The roadside market or... main retail area is a mix of restaurants, private booths, craft shops, gas stations, and recreation area".<sup>4</sup> Wright's plan relied on the early twentieth century utopian attitude towards the automobile and adapted his city design around the envisioned use of the automobile. The automobile as an expression of a philosophical commitment to a self-reliant individual reinforced the Broadacre City design.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of this movement rests on its, "theoretical connection with nature, the design process being derived from natural laws rather than philosophical idealism or classical rules".<sup>6</sup> Equally important was the emphasis that was placed upon a close relationship between building and landscape, permitting the house to blend comfortably into its setting.<sup>7</sup>

Wright's notion of a roadside market or main retail area as an 'urban center' may have led to the concept of the American 'mall'. Initially located in suburbia, the introduction of the mall provided merchants with the possibility of increased profit without increased property taxes and high inner city rental rates.

The notion of establishing new areas for industrial, commercial, and residential uses that would provide a higher monetary return for investors and users alike has increased the popularity of the sub-division of land. This factor appears to have historical precedence as the, "pioneer town was based on growth, not stability, mostly an economic monoculture rather than a polyculture. In contrast to most European towns, many U.S. towns were built around extracting resources quickly (...) The gridiron plan implied many things: that the town could grow quickly and had no man-made limits, that one place was as good as the next, and that land was a standard commodity to be traded and speculated on".<sup>8</sup> The sub-division of land remains a relatively effortless process. "It does not require large capital: the subdivider needs only invest in the land and

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<sup>4</sup> S. Van der Ryn: *Sustainable Communities — A New Design Synthesis for Cities, Suburbs and Towns*, Sierra Club/Random House 1991, p. 220.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, s. 219.

<sup>6</sup> H. Allen Brooks: *Frank Lloyd Wright and the Prairie School*, George Braziller, Inc., New York 1984, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10

<sup>8</sup> S. Van der Ryn: *op. cit.*, p. 3.

its survey and legal division, although he may do more (...) It decentralizes decision, relieves the developer of the burden of architectural design, and allows subsequent owners some choice about their buildings. Land can be put to use piecemeal, as demand develops, and public agencies can control the general lines of development without being asked to make similar deliberations each time a building goes up. Thus the subdivision has many social advantages, despite its unpredictable effect on site quality. It is more effective at low or moderate densities, where uses are not complex, and buildings are either detached or simply connected".<sup>9</sup>

The sub-division, though economical, often sacrifices amenities that may occur within an urban environment. Also, planners and designers have learned that the metropolis and the suburban subdivisions have lost their market appeal. "We can no longer afford either sprawling Suburbia or the congested Metropolis: still less can we afford a congested Suburbia, whose visual openness depends upon the cellular isolation and regimentation of its component families in mass structures".<sup>10</sup>

This has led to the beginning of one new type of city which is built on the fringe of the urban center. This new type begins with two basic elements; the single-family home development and the shopping mall which becomes the purchasing center for the area. These new areas, with the mall taking the place of the traditional city square are becoming known as "Edge Cities".<sup>11</sup>

Joel Garreau defines the 'Edge City' as "any place that:

1. Has five million square feet or more of leasable office space.
2. Has 600,000 square feet or more of leasable retail space.
3. Has more jobs than bedrooms.
4. Is perceived by the population as one place.
5. Was not like a "city" as recently as thirty years ago".<sup>12</sup>

The concept of this new city is similar to other previous twentieth century notions of the city and may, however remote, exemplify the American 'Ideal' of new beginnings — which has kept the American public on the move from one location to another always searching for living conditions.

Contrary to other new city types, this new city type does not have an urban history or a historical urban context. Essentially, these new

<sup>9</sup> K. Lynch: *Site Planning*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1984, p. 334.

<sup>10</sup> L. Mumford: *The City in History Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York 1961, p. 511.

<sup>11</sup> J. Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., New York 1991 p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> J. Garreau: *op. cit.*, p. 6—7.

developments have the potential of beginning within a non-urban natural environmental context. Often, when viewing the site prior to the ground breaking, the natural setting presents a context of country and town which is reminiscent of Wright's 'Broadacre City' and Howard's 'Garden City'. This is often destroyed in the building process creating a setting which appears to be a continuation of the suburban 'city'.

Despite the apparent poverty of urban historical context, new cities regardless of location bring a wide variety of contextural conditions. These contexts appear within; the built form which is often of a particular temporal circumstance, aspects of culture and regional significance, and contexts of the individual. Any given context has cornucopian possibilities. "Context is boundless in two senses. First, any given context is open to further description. There is no limit in principle to what might be included in a given context, to what might be shown to be relevant to the performance of a particular, act".<sup>13</sup> City planning and design which is initially open to all contextural possibilities finds itself utilizing the strengths of the many instead of only the elements of a closed system.

The birth of a new city also brings a grafting of different contexts onto predominant or prevailing contexts creating a polygot of contexts. This has been the trend in America as the culture, "becomes polygot, once and for all and irreversibly. The period of languages, coexisting but closed and deaf to each other, comes to an end. Languages throw light on each other: one language can, after all, see itself only in light of another language".<sup>14</sup>

The experience of the boundlessness of contextural languages that are brought to the new city often requires an interpretation or translation of those contexts. This involves a viewing of that new context in light of other contexts while "the experience that is present 'at moment' is indebted to an act of representation, perception is indebted to a reproducing recognition".<sup>15</sup>

Several contexts placed with and against each other avoid closure as on master context. There exists a state of continuous change which has a continuous influence upon those contexts and the perceivers of those contexts. This brings the second notion of context in that, "context is also unmasterable in a second sense: any attempt to codify context can

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<sup>13</sup> J. Culler: *On Deconstruction — Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca—New York 1982, pp. 123—124.

<sup>14</sup> M. M. Bakhtin: *The Dialogic Imagination*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas 1981, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> J. Habermas: *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1987, p. 174.

always be grafted onto the context it sought to describe, yielding a new context which escapes previous formulation".<sup>16</sup> The grafting of one context upon another causes a sense of displacement with in each contextual language. That displacement, may be utilized as a catalyst in a transitional period of awakening a discovery of the city's identity. It is through displacement that city may gain a necessary perspective on itself in the determination or creation of its identity.<sup>17</sup>

Whether the new "Edge City" is able to establish a feasible identity or whether it becomes another element in an urban conglomeration remains to be seen. The avoidance of identity loss remains a strong component in the development or redevelopment of city.

An important aspect of identity is the establishment of a sense of a neighborhood. When, "traced back to its origins, this turns out to be the old village component, as essential to a balanced urban life as are its centers of higher culture and purposeful association".<sup>18</sup> The sense of neighborhood has been established as an important element in other new city types.

The work of Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk acknowledges the importance of neighborhood as a community and the polygot of contextual languages which are present in the urban environment. The turn-of-the-century notion of the city and its effect on social and individual well-being is prevalent in their designs.

The work of Duany and Plater-Zyberk, "begins with the recognition that design affects behaviour" (...). They "see the structure and function of a community as interdependent. Because of this, they believe a designer's decisions will permeate the lives of residents not just visually but in the way residents live. They believe in design structures functional relationships, quantitatively and qualitatively, and that it is a sophisticated tool whose power exceeds its cosmetic attributes".<sup>19</sup> However, the post-modern world has discovered the problems that are inherent in the utopian schemes of the early-mid twentieth century in the attempt to influence the well-being of society and the individual through the single context of the built environment. The new cities of Duany and Plater-Zyberk attempt to remedy this through careful planning and regulation.

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<sup>16</sup> J. Culler: *op. cit.*, p. 124.

<sup>17</sup> G. A. Barlett, *Exile and Change in Renaissance Literature*, Yale University 1984, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> L. Mumford: *op. cit.*, p. 499.

<sup>19</sup> W. Lennertz: *Town-Making Fundamentals*; A. Krieger, A. Duany, Plater-Zyberk: *Towns and Town-Making Principles*, Rizzoli International 1991, p. 21.

The new cities of Duany and Plater-Zyberk may be seen as a contrast to the merging 'Edge City'. For instance, the city of Duany/Plater-Zyberk is often found in a remote setting distant from existing cities. They also design the city with a somewhat centrally located square containing commercial and public elements, with regulated building design codes, and with availability of property for those who are able to afford the costs. These limitations may be seen as barriers to the notion of polyglot contextural treatment of the city and perhaps creating instead a sense of uniformity and compliance within a monoglot context.

Nevertheless, as another turn-of-the-century approaches the city continues to evolve with the testing of new ideas concerning the urban environment. Those ideas as contexts in themselves will be disseminated and grafted on to a variety of new or existing contexts. An increasing awareness of regional and global concerns will, "set a new direction for urban design: more compact, mixed-use communities, more efficient buildings, diverse transit systems, an ecologically sound agriculture, water and waste conservation, and ultimately, a greater sensitivity to the uniqueness and integrity of each region".<sup>20</sup>

#### STRESZCZENIE

U progu dwudziestego pierwszego stulecia jesteśmy świadkami ewolucji, jaka ma miejsce w naszych miastach wraz ze zmianami zachodzącymi w dziedzinie polityki i kultury. Znaczna część działalności gospodarczej prowadzonej w mieście nie koncentruje się już w samym jego środku a raczej na obrzeżach miasta, gdzie czynsz i ceny nieruchomości są stosunkowo niskie. Istnieje wiele powodów uzasadniających ten trend, począwszy od poszukiwania lepszych warunków życia przez mieszkańców miasta aż po dążenie do osiągnięcia lepszych korzyści gospodarczych, zarówno przez przedsiębiorstwa, jak i osoby fizyczne.

Rozwój nowych miast bez względu na ich lokalizację wymaga wielu różnorodnych uwarunkowań. Uwarunkowania te tkwią wewnątrz, składają się na nie: forma budowlana, która często wynika z okoliczności danej chwili, sprawy kulturowe i regionalne o istotnym znaczeniu oraz kontekst jednostki. Każdy z tych aspektów oferuje nieograniczone wprost możliwości.

Podobnie jak w ubiegłych czasach, przełom wieków przynosi ewolucyjne zmiany w charakterze miasta, które staje się polem doświadczalnym dla nowych idei i pomysłów dotyczących środowiska urbanistycznego.

<sup>20</sup> S. Van der Ryn, *op. cit.*, p. IX.