In The Aftermath of Paradise: The Modern Urban Utopia Reconsidered

MICHAEL K. JENSON
University of Colorado at Boulder

For a good part of the twentieth century, there has been a predominant set of ideals which guided Western humankind's perception of its ability to affect and change its surroundings. This ideological project commonly referred to as Modernity, had its beginnings in the Enlightenment and has dominated Western thought throughout the twentieth century. Religion and other prevalent superstitions were discarded to embrace the methodology of science and the innate human creativity. With such an ideology, humankind was to be liberated from the tyranny of both his nature and the external forces of his environment, allowing for the pursuit of the essential attributes of freedom and progress as noble ends.[1] However, though the rhetoric surrounding the modern project claimed the potential of fulfillment for such lofty goals, in the end, the incidences of destruction brought about by this project seemed to betray such goals. Consequently, towards the latter part of this century, the emergence of such events lead to a crisis of faith in regards to modernity which eventually undermined its quite formidable foundation of legitimacy.

Within the realm of urbanism, many of the promises made by the modern project proved lacking in creating the socially harmonious environments of aesthetic purity it promised. Its projects emerged as cold, sterile, and alienating environments that bred dissension instead of harmony. Fear became the norm in such environments, with the image of the city as the storehouse of the collected memories of human culture with the perception of it being synonymous with the breakdown of civilization.

In the wake of the eradication of the traditional icons of urbanity left by the advent of the modern project, the rapid rise of modern consumerism, and the ever-increasing influence of the mass media, the public realm has been over-shadowed by the private. The abrupt changes brought about with the huge paradigm shifts of modernity have led to a rise in romanticism for an idealized past. Though claiming a return to the pragmatism that created the closely-knit communities of the past, this type of historicism is often symbolic of a rejection of the positivist's faith in the potential of the rational problem-solving of science in favor of rigid value systems which in ways are equally removed from the context of their creation.

Though the latter claims to have shed the utopian tendencies of the former, both projects contain both implicit and explicit utopian tendencies. In her discussion on Utopia, Barbara Goodwin cites six potential manifestations of the utopian impulse. There are two forms which coincide with impulses found within both modern and postmodern urban theory. In relation to the former, the notion of an ideal alternative future brought about by rational enlightened thought that can create a social perfection is embedded within its rhetoric.[2] The longing for the rebirth of traditional values fundamental to the post-modern discourse, is reminiscent of the utopian "idealization of the past." This idea of recapturing a "Golden Age" evokes a kind of

"retrenchment and conservation to prevent a worse decline."[3]

The following discussion will critically analyze utopian ideals endemic to modern and post-modern theories of urbanism, to discern the utopian similarities of their respective agendas and the potential that each might have to affect an urbanism truly adept at tackling the problems of our modern urbanity. The "modern" underpinnings of Tony Garnier's *Cite Industrielle* and Le Corbusier's *Ville Contemporaine* will be contrasted with the "postmodern" polemic of Duany and Plater-Zyberk's *Seaside* township to exemplify the ongoing theoretical conflict between these two ideologies and to point the way to a third option which can utilize the positive attributes of both movements.

I. SOCIAL UTOPIANISM, THE CITE INDUSTRIELLE, AND THE VILLE CONTEMPORAINE

In late nineteenth century France, there was a rise in interest among many writers, politicians, and urban theorists, regarding the social ideals proposed by the Socialist utopians of the early part of the century. These ideals were plundered and radically reinvented to coincide with the needs of later theorists who were attempting to reinstate the heroic idealism prevalent in the earlier part of the century.[4] Also arising from this same spirit of utopian eclecticism was the recurrent fascination with the theme of the machine as the "emancipator of humanity," and its potential role in the restructuring of a society to afford its working classes better living and working conditions.

Many of these socialist traditions in ascension amongst the intellectual underground during the latter part of the century were epitomized in Emile Zola's novels; *Fecondite, Travail,* and *Verdite.* In the second novel of this series, *Travail,* the author utilizes the theories of the French utopian socialist Charles Fourier for the futuristic city envisioned within its pages. "*Travail* is the work I wanted to create with Fourier, the organization of labor, father and regulator of the world.....with him I create the city, a city of the future, a kind of phalanstery."[5] The theories behind this city followed the Newtonian picture of the universe as a harmoniously integrated system and both Zola and Fourier saw no reason why such a system based on such a notion could not serve as a model for human society.[6] In such a society, old, outdated moralities were to be superseded by new methods of existence more conducive to producing social harmony.

Implicit to this model, is the concept that humankind contains an intrinsic capacity to co-habitate without conflict in the pursuit of collective interests. To achieve this state, however, two radical changes to existing social structures had to occur. The first involved the discarding of the traditional nuclear family structure and rigid moral system it re-enforced. To reinforce the necessary attribute of

affection, love and its counterpart sexual desire were to find more spontaneous outlets and would be subjected to a minimum of restrictions.[7] The second was to occur within the realm of politics where traditionally decisive methods were to be transfigured into a cooperative process which addressed social problems in a rational and just manner. Individualism, and the competition it bred, were to be eliminated and replaced with a more collective form of organization that would decrease the need for government. In other words, its underlying utopian impulse sought to create a sense of community and cooperation, not in the traditional sense, but in a more universal manner where all inhabitants would be considered equal.[8]

It was these attributes of harmony and equality that Zola set out to illustrate in his novels, and it is here that the link between the Utopian theory of the earlier part of the century and Garnier's project for a modern industrial city emerges. We know that Garnier had come into contact with *Travail* (though he had at not read the novel at the time of the conception of the city), because the author's name and book title were added to a later rendering depicting the administration building.[9] Further, the similarities of the theories expressed in both the literary and graphic depiction of the respective cities is indicative of the relationship that these two works share and their connection to theories of Fourier and Saint-Simon.

Garnier, like his utopian predecessors, believed in the intrinsic goodness of humankind. Hence, his project contained no police stations, law courts, or jails because with the dissolution of individualistic capitalistic tendencies, such structure would become obsolete. Churches would also no longer be necessary because a more natural form of religion akin to the paganism of the antiquities where exercise, health, and labor became paramount and were seen to be the keys to unlocking the innate goodness of humanity. The machine, as a direct aid to the latter of these attributes, was seen to contain the potential to simultaneously cultivate this behavior as well as provide the freedom to pursue other activities capable of assisting in uncovering the innate virtue of human nature.

A connection between the *Ville Contemporaine* and the *Cite Industrielle* can be traced, which emphasizes the transformation of the utopian social polemic of the nineteenth century into the form that proved to be one of the greatest influences on twentieth century urban planning. This lineage is revealed in several themes discussed above, most notably, the suppression of individual desires, the potential of the machine, and the belief in the positivist methods of the Enlightenment to solve chronic social ills. However, within this context there is an implicit heroic aestheticism which was more subdued in the socialist utopian theories.

Le Corbusier was also interested in the potential advantages of collective action, but not to uncover humankind's true nature as freedom. He believed such an attribute was useful in the systematic organization of individuals to create works that would unlock the potential greatness inherent in humankind. In *Urbanisme*, he asserts,

> We must create great works,. . . because even though Man is petty and Narrow-minded, he has within him the possibility of greatness. . .The difficulty is no longer an overwhelming one, it can be sub-divided indefinitely into stages; each stage can be adapted to the individual. . . Men can be paltry, but the thing we call Man is great.[10]

This quote emphasizes Le Corbusier's fascination with humanity's potential as a collective phenomenon. The city was seen to be one of humankind's greatest achievements and it was the striving to create such a work that was the authentic reason for the exultation of Labor. At this point, Le Corbusier's view departs radically from his predecessors and takes on a Nietzschean-like call for heroic and noble acts as the most legitimate aim for any societal structure.[11] The danger intrinsic to this form of aestheticism within the political realm was illustrated tragically with the rise of the National Socialists in Germany.

The architect also had great faith in the potential of the machine,

but with a slightly different emphasis on its possible usage. Where the utopian socialists saw the machine as eliminating much of the toil that absorbed much of the creative energy of the human spirit, Le Corbusier envisioned the machine as the supreme instrument in the quest to progress in the disciplines of Art and Science.

> Science has given us the machine. The machine gives unlimited power. And we in our turn can perform miracles by its means. We have in our hands a technical equipment which is the sum of Man's acquired knowledge. And armed with this equipment. . . we can create great works.[12]

This statement simultaneously illustrates Le Corbusier's approach to the city and his feeling that the machine could lift humankind on to a higher creative plane of existence. His assimilation of technology and society was to produce a conception of the city being transformed into a great mechanism, and that through its efficiency could enhance the potential of human society and propel civilization into the coming heroic modern age.

The intrepid tone of the rhetoric surrounding the description of the *Ville Contemporaine* ultimately betrays many of the positive attributes its creator envisioned. It takes the theories of Fourier, and intensifies the discourse of its utopian foundations to the point that his city transfigures into a form of propaganda for the modern project. The calls for the rejection of history symbolic in the leveling of Paris, the sterility of the geometry used to organize the city, and the almost messianic faith in the potential of technology, proved more destructive than beneficial in many ways. Many of its utopian aspects spawned a tyrannical belief in the need for a "clean slate" that was responsible for the unquestioning destruction of countless historically valuable sites. The rejection of traditional moral values seems to have lead to a modern identity crisis where anonymity has eroded the necessary fabric for a successive collective. In many ways, humanity has became enslaved to the technology that was prophesied as its servant. The arguments of many the Anti-utopians and the criticisms of the more traditionally inclined urban theorists have began to become painfully obvious.

II. THE POSTMODERN RESPONSE:
THE REINVENTION OF HISTORY

Against this backdrop, the criticisms of these urbanists began to grow with demands to bring back a more traditional sense of community. The vernacular and classical traditions of architecture and town planning were said to be re-analyzed to understand what it is that gives the traditional city its essential character as genuinely inhabitable space. The label for this revivalist movement within the urban realm has been deemed rather ironically as the "new urbanism."

The proponents of this movement attempt to utilize and recreate traditional notions of street patterning, park layouts, and housing scale of the traditional American or European township. An example of typical strategy of organization include a clearly defined "town center" with streets and axis radiating outwards signifying a move back to the pedestrian scale. In other words, a kind of winning back of the streetscape from the tyranny of the automobile. Further, lot sizes and block lengths are regulated so that all housing fronts the street, and the distances to be traveled within the immediate neighborhood are moderate. Such moves are said to assert an order, while being flexible enough to allow for future expansion.[13]

To punctuate this feeling of community, commercial and civic buildings are set in prominent public open spaces, creating landmarks that terminate street vistas. Also, many supporters advocate a strong control over a majority of the aspects of private building in lieu of creating such interesting public spaces. This is illustrated in the codes that defines acceptable materials, styles, ground plan configurations, and techniques of construction. As William Lennertz phrases it in his description of Duany and Plater-Zyberk's method-

ology of town-planning; "In a town built without the benefit of centuries or a diversity of founders, the codes encourage variety while ensuring the harmony required to give character to a community."[14] It is this particular "pragmatic" notion of community that is the concept driving the rigid rules and guidelines set down in the preliminary stages of a project included under the theoretical umbrella of this kind of urbanism. This statement seems to be quite telling, in history not just being recalled, but recreated.

However, it seems to be recreated in a temporal vacuum where most of the subtle variables that make the urban environment interesting are controlled. In a description of one of its most famous models, the claimed pragmatism of its vision becomes strangely idyllic; "One can imagine Aristotle strolling through Seaside in the raking light of cocktail hour, chatting across fences with people on porches. They would admire his *chiton* and tan; he their easy civility."[15]

With this description the underlying conflict between the image and the reality of what is being proposed begins to surface. When we speak of this "new" urbanism, is it a methodology being described that is truly concerned with addressing the real challenges endemic to the modern urban environment or is it an attempt to turn away from this problem? Should the main goal of our urban endeavors be to create a setting that Aristotle would find comfortable? Upon closer inspection, the most prominent characteristic that emerges seems to be the notion of a re-invention of tradition. Worse, it seems to produce a rather sanitized view of history. Actually, such impulses generally do not produce a true methodology of rediscovering such traditions, but serves only to obscure the recurrent acts of their reinvention.[16] Thus, though claiming to rediscover our traditional past, such activities signify an intentional "turning away" from the problems of modern urbanity and the public realm towards the "self-protective" nature of the private realm. As Paul Walker Clark states in his contention with the post-modern claim of respecting context and embracing popular culture; "Whose history?, Whose notion of context?, Whose vernacular?, Whose 'popular culture'?"[17] Within the "knee-jerk" reaction of the latter, rediscovering the virtues of the public realm is not the real issue, creating fantasies that placate the fears of an insecure middle class seems closer to the mark.

III. A MODERN RESPONSE TO URBANITY: THE AUTHENTIC NATURE OF DIVERSITY

Our preceding analysis has shown that many of the predominant urban theories of Modernity and traditionalist views of NU contain implicit utopian tendencies. Such inclinations are not necessarily detrimental to the modern urban environment because the images that stem from them can be a powerful emotive tool in the instigation of essential social change. However, this same impulse can become an unhealthy component to the public psyche if the ideal it propagates portrays an aesthetic myth as realizable or one that becomes intellectually totalizing. In the urban proposals discussed above, a potentially detrimental utopian aesthetism becomes manifest in two distinct forms. The first involves the historical dimension and its relationship to the urban environment, while the second is concerned with the fictive nature of our conception of the notion of community.

Both of these ideologies propose a methodology that allows for a disjointed relationship to the historical traditions of the city. It is explicit in the theories such as Corb's while more implicit in many of the NU proposals such as Seaside. In the *Ville Contemporaine,* Le Corbusier sets out to purposely annihilate the history of its context. This marginalizes the role history plays in the formulation of an urban morphology. The rigid geometrical organization it envisioned to replace what was destroyed, would most certainly fall dramatically short of producing the depth and richness of the urbanity sought to raze in its egotism. Is a city with no history, truly a city? And after such destruction, could a harmonious environment really be created from the "ashes," so to speak?

Where Modernism rejects the role of history to the extreme, the traditionalist inclination of Post-modernism and is to first idealize it, and then reinvent through its imagery. This romanticism longs to create an urban environment that ignores many of the social ills of the present. These attempts to materialize an urban "Disney World" where all the intricate and subtle differences that set up the web of resistance based social and political differences that give our cities their vibrancy is flattened into a one dimensional projection of metropolitan kitsch. Here the "traditionalist" falls into a similar trap to that of Modernist; a rich meaningful history can not be created in an instant, no matter how hard we try to reinvent it.

Coupled with this historical schizophrenia, is another unattainable ideal that both movements portray as not only realizable, but essential. In fact, it is a favorite myth in much of the discourse surrounding the modern conception of the city. Deyan Sudjic terms this as the *myth of community* and describes it as:

> Half rose-tinted Frank Capra, half *Passport to Pimlico,* it's a fantasy that celebrates the corner shop, borrowing a cup of sugar from the neighbors, and all those other unimpeachable suburban virtues that range from motherhood to apple pie.[18]

The rhetoric of NU seems to follow this myth without reserve, while modernism finds its roots in a similar notion, but with more grandiose expectations. It tries to portray the potential of a more universal *community of humankind.* In reality, this notion of "community" as the essential trait to producing the stability necessary for urban life is incredibly misleading in regards to the true nature of the city. Despite the static materiality of its structures, the majority of the parameters defining the city are in a perpetual flux as diverse groups compete for the available resources and power. In such an atmosphere, a low level strife emerges that is maintained within the limits set by the laws and moral values of the people that inhabit it. One must remember that, first and foremost, people are attracted to the city for the opportunity to better themselves, economically and socially.

Thus, the initial impulse for co-operation is based on rather selfish individual interests that change continually, not some innate need to commune with our neighbors. Cities grow and become powerful if they successfully provide for these desires, and decline if they don't. So, to attempt to build a model of urbanity, utopian or otherwise, that could address the true nature of the urban condition, it must rest the notion of diversity (perpetual flux), not community (perpetual stability). Such a condition rests fundamentally on sociological, political, and economic issues, not purely aesthetic ones.

A clue to this essential nature of modern urbanity can be found in another statement by Sudjic; "Clearly, the amorphous suburb, and the sharply focused ghetto, look set to coexist for a considerable time to come. Their meanings, however, are not to be found in the sentimental visions of community."[19] The challenge, then, in formulating a truly authentic modern vision of urbanity is to maintain the fluidity of the overlapping meanings that bequeath to the city its vitality. The short-comings of the two predominant urban paradigms of the twentieth century is that they proposed rigid ordering systems that attempted to arrest this fluidity for the production of an image of stability.

Foucault proposes a paradigm that avoids the pitfalls of the "communal" urban scheme in favor of a multi-faceted relational power structure that allows the various individual groups to define their identity, discourse, and histories in accordance to individual agendas. He calls for the resistance intrinsic to the formulation of individual and group identity found in the modern urban realm to remain localized and specific to their traditional locations, but in a state of coexistence.[20]

This concept is endemic to his larger argument against the acceptance of models that portray he necessity for a intellectually complete system of thought. Such systems inevitably determine who has the right to speak, what are acceptable modes of thought, and

what the proper perceptions of the present condition and the histori-
cal events that lead up to this condition. If truths emerge and are only
truly relevant to contexts that spawn them, they are inherently
transformed with the passing of time and the changing of their
circumstance.[21] A static system of interpretation that attempts to
transcend such changes will intrinsically attempt to override what is
considered "other," or different to perpetuate its own survival. It was
this trait that impelled Foucault to argue for the rupturing of linear
historical perceptions, the continual rewriting of the descriptions of
historical accounts, and the uninterrupted reinterpretation of ac-
cepted facts.

This is similar to what A. K. Bierman describes as; "a unity with
diversity," and goes on to assert that the cultivation of this trait "is
the proper end of the city."[22] However, the underlying theory to both
of these arguments is not an aesthetic one, but a socio/political one.
An endemic problem that has been a recurrent theme in both the
modern and post-modern paradigms analyzed above is their utopian
aestheticism. There seems to be a fundamental search for architec-
tural forms or styles that can establish a symbolic content that can
somehow order and smooth over the differences and conflicts
inherent to the urban condition. Styles or forms, in and of them-
selves, are lacking content. The search for universal mythical archi-
tectural savior must be let go for structures that stem from and
attempt to relate to, their immediate economic, political, and cultural
contexts. For as Patrick J. Pouler asserts: "Any attempt to construct
a community through its architecture is, at best, a fantasy of es-
cape."[23] History, has proven this with a multitude of architectural and
urban utopias throughout two millenia, and if we are not careful, with
the ones related to the "new urbanism" as well. For though its
supporters argue for social diversity, many of their proposals and
realized projects have been woefully prejudiced to the upper middle
class.

Thus, the urban paradigm by this study could borrow from the
theories of both types of urbanity. It could utilize the ideals of
equality and social justice from the former, while allowing others to
pursue the more relaxed traditionalism of the later. The goal of a
modern city should not be to tear down or dissolve the distinctness
of the various neighborhoods or architectual types that comprise it,
but to level the social disjunction that denies to certain groups the
power to define their environment according to their values and
interests. The central point being, is that though distinct and different
groups sometimes compete, they can coexist in the creation of a
mutually beneficial urban environment. The ideals portrayed in the
urbanity of each of the models proposed above, built or unbuilt, can
still be valuable as guides, but not as the exclusive blueprints for
future interventions that their proponents claim. Though a *Seaside*
can coexist with the remnants of the modern movement on one level,
it is the diversity of their opposing meanings that truly binds them
into a city. It is on the strengthening of the connections between these
distinct meanings that the focus of our study of the morphology of
urbanity should rest, not the dissolution of the meanings themselves
through their shallow recreation as image.

The urban patterns that spawned the great cities of past epochs

should not be perused for their picturesque qualities alone, but also
for ideas on how diverse social groups were woven together into
dynamic fabrics that spawned rich and symbolic urban environ-
ments. Environments that could not have been be created on purely
aesthetic criteria. The medieval European town should not be
admired only for its picturesque qualities, but also for the way in
which the entire class structure inhabited the same buildings and
public spaces. It was this diversity that instilled meaning into the
edifices that still survive today. Thus far, though, the rhetoric of the
"New Urbanism" promises this trait in its discourse and proposi-
tions, but seems to have provided only attempts at creating its image.

NOTES

[1] Nan Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publish-
ers, 1996), p. 105.

[2] Barbara Goodwin and Keith Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia* (New York:
Saint Martin's Press), p. 25.

[3] Goodwin and Taylor, p. 23.

[4] Anthony Vidler, "The New World: The Reconstruction of the Urban
Utopia in Late Nineteenth Century France," *Perspecta: The Yale Journal*
vol. 13 (1971): 247.

[5] Vidler, p. 250.

[6] Goodwin and Taylor, p. 124.

[7] Ibid., p. 125.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Dora Wiebenson, *Tony Garnier: The Cite Industrielle* (New York:
George Braziller, 1969), p. 19.

[10] Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press,
1986), p. 148.

[11] For a description of Nietzsche's political aestheticism, see Keith Ansell-
Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker* (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 147-162.

[12] Le Corbusier, p. 148.

[13] William Lennertz, "Town-Making Fundamentals," Alex Krieger and
William Lennertz, eds., *Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk:
Towns and Town-making Principles* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), p. 22.

[14] Krieger and Lennertz, eds., p. 22.

[15] Patrick Pinnell, "Organon," Alex Krieger and William Lennertz, eds.,
*Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk: Towns and Town-making
Principles* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), p. 105.

[16] Ellin, p. 110.

[17] Paul Walker Clark and Thomas Dutton, "Notes Towards a Critical
Theory of Architecture" in *The Discipline of Architecture: Inquiry
through Design: Proceedings of the 73rd ACSA Meeting* (Washington:
ACSA Press, 1985), p. 18. Cited by Nin Ellin, p. 159.

[18] Deyan Sudjic, *The 100 Mile City* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co.,
1992), p. 279.

[19] Sudjic, p. 292.

[20] Ellin, p. 183.

[21] M. Christine Boyer, "Return of Aesthetics to City Planning" in *Philo-
sophical Streets,* Phillip Crow, ed. (Washington: Maisonneuve Press,
1990), p. 99.

[22] A.K. Bierman, *The Philosophy of Urban Existence* (Ohio University
Press, 1973), p. 140.

[23] Patrick J. Pouler, "Disciplinary Society and the Myth of Aesthetic
Justice" in *Design Review: Challenging Urban Aesthetic Control,* B.
Scheer and W. Preiser, eds. (New York: Chapman & Hall, 1994), p. 186.