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Meeting of the Minds

H. Fernando Burga

By the time you, the reader, finish this *Places* dispatch, about two thousand people will have migrated from the countryside to the city. Weekly, about 1.4 million people around the globe make this arduous transition. The emergence of metropolitan areas as home to a majority of the world's population framed the agenda for the Meeting of the Minds conference in Oakland, California, September 11–13.

The event, sponsored by the University of California at Berkeley's College of Environmental Design, in partnership with Berkeley's Global Metropolitan Studies Initiative and the statewide UC Transportation Center, brought together experts from academia, the nonprofit sector, and business to discuss challenges to metropolitan areas and explore sustainable strategies for transportation, land use, and urban design. Toyota USA, Inc., provided major funding, while the Urban Age Institute provided assistance in conference management.

The conference's point of departure was that the growth of metropolitan areas worldwide is affecting nature, the built environment, and society in profound ways. Providing a high quality of life in the world's metropolises will be one of the most important challenges of the twenty-first century, and is especially urgent in light of global warming.

The event sought to set in motion an exchange among experts in architecture, urban design, city and regional planning, public policy, vehicle design, traffic engineering, and related fields. And it sought to show that academics and practitioners from different disciplines share many common problems, and could benefit from each other's ideas and proposals.

(E)Merging Thoughts

The support from Toyota was particularly noteworthy for a conference like this. Mobility and access are a big part of the metropolitan challenge, and the company is intent on staying abreast of evolving notions about the shape a character of cities to come.

The company was represented at the event by Irving Miller and Bill Reinert. Miller explained how high the stakes are: "We...will go from the current 250 million vehicles on the globe to three-quarters of a billion in the next twenty years." For companies like Toyota, this transformation to a motorized world calls for a new vision of the relationships among manufacturers, cities, and other sectors of the economy to produce "sustainable mobility"—a new approach that embraces technological innovation, reduces CO₂ emissions, and effectively manages the other social, economic and environmental challenges brought about by urbanization around the world.

Echoing these thoughts, Dean Harrison Fraker of Berkeley's CED spoke of the need for new types of vehicles that better fit urban conditions, especially in China, India, and other emerging economies where high densities and limited road space are the rule. "The central questions which dominate this conversation are: What will cities look like in the future? How will vehicles fit into the vision of the future?"

According to Fraker, the innovative frame of mind must expand to include new designs for buildings, districts and regions as well as technological innovations in vehicles, fuels, and their use. He also called for new "public-private partnerships which reward efficiency, technological innovation and social innovation." Places like CED are the incubators for new

ideas, places where new paradigms are invented and the links between theory and practice are forged.

Steven Chu of Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory also discussed the prospects for new fuels, an important direction for research and development in view of the finite supply of oil as well as the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the next two decades. According to Chu, new fuels could reduce emissions by a substantial amount, but are unlikely to suffice to meet Kyoto or California standards in the time available.

Ways of Thinking: Alternative Approaches, Scales, and Designs

Elizabeth Deakin, director of the UC Transportation Center and co-director of Berkeley's interdisciplinary Global Metropolitan Studies Initiative, noted that currently there are several alternative visions of the road ahead. "Business as usual" will likely result in increased congestion, pollution, and global warming. An alternative vision emphasizes new vehicles powered by new fuels, with high tech highway operations and management to keep the traffic flowing. A contrasting vision focuses on coordinated land use-transportation planning to facilitate transit, walking, and biking, with the private automobile playing a smaller role.

In Deakin's assessment, the major challenge for the next decade will be to find the best path forward: "What is at stake is the character of cities; how we redesign and rethink the connections between engineering, land use, urban design and policy will help determine the livability of our metropolitan regions and the future of the world's environment, economy, and social relationships."

Robert Cervero, Chair of the Dept. of City and Regional Planning

at Berkeley, analyzed the city at different scales: the region, the district, and the neighborhood. For Cervero, the goal of planning is to achieve land uses at the neighborhood and district levels which provide choice, a healthy environment, social interaction, and economic opportunity, and then use transportation investments to link these neighborhoods and districts, to create a sustainable region. Cervero showed how rail transit or bus rapid transit can complement sustainable neighborhoods and districts.

Urban designers and Berkeley faculty members Elizabeth Macdonald and Allan Jacobs brought the role of creative design into the conversation. Their presentations showed how design excellence coupled with creative city planning and progressive political leadership have made such places as Curitiba, Brazil, and Vancouver, Canada, excellent places to live. These successful cities have defined urbanism broadly, integrating built form, transportation, social equity, and ecological function.

As Jacobs noted, the establishment of regional transportation corridors—as in Curitiba’s “structurals” or Copenhagen’s finger plan—can shape city and regional development while at the same time offering healthy local communities.

Macdonald pointed out that street design goes two ways: “Just as the design of the car influences the design of the street, the design of the street should influence the design of the car.” She argued for more flexibility in both street design and in vehicle design, “inventing new combinations which offer possibilities beyond accepted mandates and conventions.”

Other speakers included innovative technology experts Susan Shaheen, Robin Chase, and Pravin Varaiya; developing countries experts



Nancy Kete, Lee Schipper, Tim Campbell, and Aaron Golub; and urban development/design consultants Martin Tillman, Peter Crowley and Paul Farmer. California Attorney General Jerry Brown gave a dinner talk, and Executive Director Jose Luis Moscovich of the San Francisco County Transportation Authority was a luncheon speaker.

Innovative use of vehicles, whether in the car sharing programs discussed by Shaheen or the dynamic ridesharing projects being designed by Chase, offers new ways of providing mobility. In addition, many cities are pursuing demand-management strategies, from the constellation of measures reviewed by Tillman to the transit investments and road-pricing experiments discussed by Moscovich.

At the same time, Varaiya pointed out, engineers are developing new approaches to vehicle control and highway operations that could make the motor vehicle and its use safer and more efficient. And Brown promised



to insist that California land use plans meet global warming mandates.

Thinking Ahead

The Meeting of the Minds conference exhibited several examples of best practices and suggested possible solutions to both present and future urban challenges. It is hoped such interdisciplinary encounters between academics, practitioners, and industry will create the basis for ongoing dialogue.

The last word arising from the conference reinforces this notion. If today we witness the effects of globalization on cities halfway across the world, in our lifetimes we will feel the effects of climate change in our own backyards. The Meeting of the Minds Conference sought to demonstrate that it is not too late to influence this process of change—thoughts can translate into actions.

Above: Relative transportation impacts. Photos courtesy of Martin Tillman.