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Author:

[Peattie, Lisa R](#)

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Planning and the Image of the City

No vision of reality is neutral. Different ways of knowing make a difference. There are many ways of seeing the world. Every vision of reality comes out of some set of interests in the real world. Every vision of reality suggests a model of acting on reality—even if that model of action is one of letting the reality alone. Ways of looking are tools, parts of making a strategy for action. They identify what's important and what's background. They suggest what is to be changed and what is to be left as it is.

A city can be thought of as built form—buildings, open spaces, passages and barriers. It can be thought of as a system of rules and regulations—taxes, building codes, rules of ownership and tenancy. It can be thought of as an arena of power and of the political arrangements that organize power. It can appear as an economic system—capital investment, supplies of labor, housing and land markets.

In reality any city is all of these. Since each way of looking represents a single aspect of reality, any one of these ways of looking must in the end lead to others. Nevertheless, it makes a difference where one begins.

The architect, for example, sees a world of built forms. The forms are important. For some architects they are so terribly important that in their slide shows you can hardly tell the models from the buildings. But practically all architects want to build big and noble buildings, and they don't worry too much about where the resources come from or who has to make way in the process. People appear in their thinking as "users"—of their schemes.

The developer, conscious of the rules under which building takes place, sees the zoning envelope and the political system to be manipulated. His picture of the city would not be physical buildings at all, but land values and systems of regulation; the developer's task is to produce "packages" of profit.

The community organizer sees the city as distributions of power—some vested in institutions, some brought together in more fragile assemblages of coalitions and community groups, some of them, as it was said once, sometimes "lying in the streets" to be collected and brought to bear as the dam's spillway brings the water's force to turn the wheels in a mill.

Cities today are thought of as economic entities. This conception (along with its architecture?) hides underlying political and institutional interests.

Photos by David Henry.

Each of these visions is different. Each has been important in shaping the world in which we live. The ways that planners have seen cities have been of particular importance because they have helped to direct government actions and make them legitimate.

At the beginning of the 1960s, when I came into the world of planning as the anthropologist in a multidisciplinary team planning a new city in Venezuela, the field was dominated by a vision that one of my colleagues there called “alabaster cities planning.” It was a view that you could say came out of the progressive reform era in the U.S., a movement in which well-meaning, well-educated people (the sort of people that you and I are) dedicated themselves to cleaning up messy cities and a good many of the people who inhabited them. The progressive reformers tried to educate the immigrants, tame the political machines, clear slums and develop parks. It was a noble movement. It’s easy for people like us to long to reinstate it. I see that longing as misplaced, so I’ll try to tell you enough about that experience so you can see why.

In “alabaster cities planning” the city was conceived of mostly as built form, as public architecture, as a great, complex public work. Its creation was properly the work of experts. If the planning were done properly, that is to say expertly, the city would be both useful and inspiring. Other experts would be called on to deal with the “social part”—to plan schools and social services. Social workers would help to develop community spirit.

The project upon which I worked in Venezuela was a good example of this approach since it was backed by a great deal of money and power and deliberately set out to be state-of-the-art by using a wide range of professionals assembled by the MIT-Harvard

Joint Center for Urban Studies.

The place where the new city was to grow was already occupied by perhaps fifty thousand people. They thought of themselves as already living in a city. There was a municipal council, a Catholic parish and a Rotary Club. The place was a splendid entrepreneurial disorder of hustling and boosterism, a rapidly growing city of the tropical frontier. But to the planners it was “the site,” a kind of canvas on which the experts would paint a finer future.

The Venezuelan agency that was responsible for the project saw it as an industrial growth pole; the project was connected to a huge dam for which the agency hoped to obtain World Bank financing. The economists on the team saw their task as identifying industries—large corporate investors, mostly from the U.S.—that might be attracted there, and projecting statistically the population that would result. Urban design was to do the rest: to translate economic goals into a beautiful, modern city that would be an agreeable place in which to live.

Amidst references to redevelopment in Philadelphia and Italian piazzas, the designers set to work to draw up a city of broad avenues and tree-shaded neighborhoods. It did not seem important to consult the people already living there; after all, the future city would be bigger and different. The people in it would be different people. Anyhow, they had an anthropologist to tell them what they should take into account. The general who was in charge of the agency in any case thought that discussions with the local people could only cause trouble.

Because planning was thought of as design, rather than as institution-building or organizing, it seemed entirely reasonable to do it in Caracas, 350 miles away. From time to time,

the experts would fly down and look about them. Often, on these trips, the designers would climb a local hill where they could have the benefit of seeing the city from a distance.

The city has not turned out much as the designers hoped. In fact, it has not very much to recommend it; it is inefficient and unpleasant, with rich and poor so sharply separated on either side of a river that most people think of it as two cities. The designers meant well, but in all their utopian visions of the alabaster city they never confronted the basic economics. The average Venezuelan cannot afford a ready-built modern house, but starts with a shack and improves it slowly as circumstances permit. Since shacks didn’t fit in the modern alabaster city, people didn’t either; now three-quarters of the population lives in shanty settlements with few or no services, while across the river rise the pricy condominiums of the modern city.

You can imagine that this situation has generated a great deal of ill feeling. It has indeed. No amount of social planning or anthropologizing can do much about that.

Finally, I must bring up a more serious problem in this alabaster cities model as it appeared in Venezuela. I came to see the urban designers and their visions of the city beautiful as window-dressing, as a way of advertising and making respectable a project that was, in essence, one of reorganizing the environment for large corporations. The conception of city as built form, as the alabaster city, had hidden conflicts of material interest and the search for economic advantage by particular groups.

I’ll give you an example. The urban designers made plans for a new city center on the ridge at the western end of the existing city. Here would be the central headquarters of the planning

agency and a modern shopping center with Sears, Roebuck as a prime tenant. A new avenue from the just-completed bridge would bring traffic straight into the new center, bypassing the existing commercial district with its disorderly clutter of auto-parts stores, dress shops and bars.

The designers saw this work as creation in the public interest. The local businessmen with interests in the existing commercial area saw it as distribution in the interest of Sears; they saw that their customers were being carried away from them. They demanded a road connection to the new avenue. Several of the designers expressed great indignation at this pushing of special interests against the plan; they thought of the plan as representing general welfare, of which Sears was somehow the instrument.

Back home in the U.S., planners would not have had things quite so much their own way. They would have had to reckon with local politics and already established interests. But through the 1950s they would generally have regarded these local interests as impediments to the realization of their vision. And, as in Venezuela, they would have seen planning largely as design, physical improvement. Indeed, there was an established legal and political tradition that held that slum clearance, the removal of substandard dwelling stock, was inherently a desirable social objective.

The alabaster city conception of the city is not what now dominates planning. We do see it sometimes, especially in Third World countries out to build modern capitals for the glorification of the recently independent states. But here in the U.S., in the struggles over urban renewal and the highway problem of the 1960s, citizens learned to read through the beautification and the city improvement rhetoric



and look for the interests at stake, and to defend theirs.

In those days, I worked with a community group opposing a highway (successfully, by the way) under the slogan “Cambridge is a city, not a highway”; blacks shouted that “urban renewal is Negro removal” and in neighborhood after neighborhood people came out in front of bulldozers and said that the slums were their homes. The planner as expert reformer has lost legitimacy—one of the casualties of the 1960s and one that I do not really regret.

But the model of the city that now dominates our perception and our thinking seems hardly an improvement. It is, in a sense, the mirror image of the alabaster cities vision of the city. That one had the city as the product of political will and skillful

Another way of thinking of cities is as built form, as great public works. This conception, embodied in the turn-of-the-century City Beautiful movement, retains its appeal today, shaping projects such as Boston's new subway stations.

In the conception of the city as an economic entity, people are sorted out on the basis of their value to the economy.

technique, with economic interests repressed from the scene. The model currently in favor seems to be of the city as an economic system, an arena for development projects carried out by a “public-private partnership” between government and profit-making entities. Perhaps this is not exactly the way to put it, for government, too, in this vision, is at least trying to be a profit-making entity. Tax revenues are said to be what makes this necessary.

does not really treat them as citizens, true members of the city.

The economic model, like the alabaster city one, hides the rest of the system. Just as the alabaster city vision hid economic interest, so the economic model hides the institutional and political interests that shape the economics. In the economic vision, cities consist of a set of interlocking markets, especially for land; capital flows freely on the basis of relative profitability.



In this vision, the whole city comes to be appraised as to its profit-making potential. Slums are still being cleared, but not because they are unsightly or in the interests of social reform. Rather, they are converted into upscale condominiums in “the logic of the market,” a logic that is seen as though it were as much a given as gravity. In the process of ordering the city according to the vision of the market, people, too, get sorted out on the basis of their economic value. If you can’t cut the mustard economically, you become a kind of human waste, to blow along the street with yesterday’s newspaper or to be picked up and placed by some human sanitation department in an appropriate shelter. Welfare recipients, the homeless—we may feel that we have to do something about them, but this current vision

Here is urban decline: Capital flows out and with it the very physical elements of the neighborhood. Window boxes come off, panes break, pipes and sinks get stolen, buildings disperse into vacant lots. There a rising market draws capital and brick row houses, only a short time ago cheap-rooming houses or abandoned buildings, seem to draw carriage lamps, shutters and hanging plants. This is all seen as in the order of nature.

But anyone in real estate could tell you differently. These markets are neighborhoods, and their economic strength or weakness is very largely dependent on activities of government—street lights, police protection, schools—as well as the investment policies of banks. A large development project is a major political undertaking, mobilizing support that produces

tax forgiveness, zoning variances and permits. What the economic model of the city sees as “market forces” is the economic aspect of a complex system of power and vested interests.

This system is represented in zoning, code enforcement and tax policy, in the school system with good schools and inferior schools, and in all the social machinery that shapes the prices the economic model calls to our attention. This social machinery is a human construction. The models of the city, too, are human constructions, just as much as the cities themselves. They are not given by the nature of things. We can make and unmake them.

I would like to see us move towards a model that would join the economic and the political in a conception of the city as a human community. We would then treat both the physical form of the city and the economic arrangements that structure our relationships to each other as aspects of the creation of a social world for us all.

In housing, for example, we would reject the alabaster city view, which saw the dwellings of the poor as “unsightly slums,” as well as the economic view, which sees the “logic of the market” as inevitably closing over those who can’t cut it in the labor market. We would see housing policy as a vehicle for citizenship — and notice, then, the way in which shelters and “welfare hotels” constitute a class of persons whose housing brings with it a place as a kind of non-citizen category.

Such a vision of the city would be a proper framework within which we might focus our practice as designers and planners about some lessons that rise from experience in projects like the Venezuelan city.

A city is not properly thought of as a work of art; it has to be a collective creation, more like a party than a building. As in a party, there are things

that can be done to shape the outcome. As the hostess in the party plans and lays out the food and drink, finds the appropriate music and adjusts the lighting, the city planners and designers deal with the transportation system, parks and open space; the city government has its building code and enforcement mechanisms. But beyond that, the city must grow as a social, collective invention, a work of politics in the broad Aristotelean sense.

“The plan” is not a template; it is important but only as a part of the planning process. It must be thought of that way from the very beginning.

The key to the urban economy is diversity and linkages. So the physical setting must serve diversity and linkages. The passion for formal order that characterized alabaster city planning must give way to a commitment to functional order, which often looks messy on the ground.

The people of the city need living places in which they can afford to live. If there are poor people in the city, and if society is not prepared to provide them with the housing they cannot afford via subsidy, there must be for them housing that the lucky rest of us will see as substandard. There will then be a part of the housing stock that shocks the “alabaster city.” The alternatives are worse. They are putting the slums out of sight, as in Brasilia; the poor house or shelter; homelessness. We must maintain what some may call slums and care for these neighborhoods with the good city services that citizens everywhere have a right to expect.

We professionals might all come to agree on these general principles, but we would have trouble putting them into practice. We lack, for starters, some of the simplest professional tools. If the urban economy is characterized by diversity and linkages, how

do we replace the old land use plan, with its assumption of homogeneity, by a way of representing diversity and linkages? The invisible structures of law and regulation are critical; how do we show these? How do we represent process and institution? How do we design for neighborhood stability over time and through change?

These technical tasks are nothing compared to the task of building the appropriate social and political environment for this kind of planning and design. Planning and design are the tool of power, or they are a kind of science fiction. Architecture is frozen music, maybe; but surely a city as built environment is frozen political economics or economic politics.

To think of the city in this way, however, is not to propose that we await what is sometimes called the “political will” for reform. Planning and urban design are part of those processes that shape the city, both the parts we see as built form and the rules, the centers of power, the visions that we may infer from the forms. If we want an inclusive sense of citizenship, or community, we have to go beyond the notion of “needs” to a more difficult and interesting vision of participatory institution building.