The 'Natural History' of the City

The Nature of Cities and their History as Criticism

by Kimmo Lapintie

Kimmo Lapintie,
Tampere University
of Technology, Finland

Modern histories of the city as a concept can be interpreted as works of criticism which most often justify the modern ideologies of planning. One interesting example of this is the man-nature relationship evident in the different forms of the mythical 'village of harmony' projected onto urban form.

HISTORY IS GENERALLY REGARDED as relevant to modern activities in almost all fields, so much so that this premise deserves a closer look. It is taken as self-evident not only in those disciplines which try to *explain* but also in those who want to *change* the world, as architecture and city planning. What is the reason for this attitude? Why should history matter?

The quick arguments are hardly convincing. Do we need history in order to be better prepared for the future? But the explanatory power of history is poor indeed, to use Popper's famous expression.[1] The most important turning points in history have been – and probably will be – unpredictable. Thus the 'lessons' from history often lead us astray, making it even more difficult to see the emerging new trends. Historical events are always explained afterwards.

Do we, then, need history to know the right thing to do? The historical 'continuity' of moral virtue is even more questionable. Why should our solutions become more praiseworthy by having a pedigree in the past? Note that the opposite argument of blaming solutions because "there is nothing new in them" is equally common – and equally unjustified.

One must, however, admit that these problems are not so serious with the pure sciences, where there is a clear distinction between 'the context of discovery' and 'the context of justification'. For scientists, the history of their discipline is a theoretical 'library', providing both methodological and conceptual knowledge, as well as recorded empirical material for testing

theories. The way these elements are mixed in modern research is a matter of justification – historical origin by itself being neither an obstacle nor an argument.

The situation is more complex with architectural and planning theories, where there are no generally accepted methods of justification – not even a temporarily dominant Kuhnian paradigm – and consequently the authority of history becomes greater. The value of modern thought and planning is measured against history, in a complicated and often contradictory way.

But can history itself justify this authority? It seems to me that the relevance of history is like Hume's Problem: In the same way as the method of induction cannot be justified by appealing to itself, the value of history cannot be measured against history. Even less so, as the *science* of history does not have a long history, and is closely related to non-scientific traditions of mythologies, images and story-telling. Even the word corresponding to 'history' means in most European languages both the science of history and *story* (cf. 'historia', 'Geschichte', 'storia'). The combination of truth and normative fiction has thus a much longer history than our modern attempts to dissociate them.

I shall try to demonstrate in this paper that the histories we encounter in connection with *urban planning*, that is, the modern stories of the city, reveal an interesting but complex normative structure as soon as we remember that we are not dealing with history *an sich*, but rather with its modern representations. Apart from being more or less honest attempts at understanding what happened, they are, at the same time, works of criticism. Very often "operative criticism"[2] that is true, but the negative side of the distorted and finalised historical material is balanced by the positive side that history, by being a form of criticism, also builds up normative structures for planning ideologies. For the researcher, they give invaluable material for the understanding of the modern ethos of urban planning. As an example, I shall analyse the different nature-relations of modern planning by searching for their projections in historiography.

The precondition of this positive effect is, however, that the stories are carefully read and demystified, not only as descriptions but also, sometimes even primarily, as prescriptions. That this is not usually the case is another effect of the ideologies of planning, in the same sense as photography is ideologically 'dangerous', because people generally assume that photographs are literal, describing the world 'as it is'. Not surprisingly, then, manipulated photographs have been widely used by political propagandists.

The same danger is evident in architectural history, since it usually does not present itself as criticism. As William Curtis describes his aims in the introduction of his *Modern Architecture Since 1900*:

> This book was written partly with the idea that a historical bridge might be built across the stream of passing intellectual fashions from the distant to the more recent past, and partly with the hope that this might somehow help towards a new integration. But such aims have been secondary: the first thing a historian ought to do is to explain what happened and why, whatever people may now think of it.[3]

The problem is that these two aims seem to be impossible to combine. If an "integration" is sought for (in a cultural phase that may even be dominated by diversity and conflict), one is led to define a Modernist tradition that is deeply rooted in historical tradition and, at the same time, the correct response to the the demands of the Industrial Age. Actually Curtis comes to demonstrate this in his book, which step by step transforms historical material into a heroic story of Modernism:

> --- the revolution in sensibility, which affected all of the arts soon after the turn of this century, constituted a break as drastic as the Renaissance, and that we are closer to the beginning of a tradition than the end of it.[4]

Gustave Doré: *Dudley Street, Seven Dials*, 1872.

It is important to note that the histories we take more or less seriously, that is, modern histories, are practically always 'post-Modernist' history, not in the sense that is usually given to this term, but in the sense that they have to relate themselves to the dominant modern ideology of planning. Some of them are even 'post-Post-Modernist', in the sense that they also have to relate themselves to the critique directed at modernist ideology, most vigorously in the seventies and eighties. The form that history takes is dependent on whether one feels the need to justify or criticize Modernism. In this sense, the more history is written to 'make sense' (in Curtis's case, to "build a bridge across the stream of changing intellectual fashions"), the more it becomes an ideological tool. It tends to become the Hi-Story of architecture.

Dirt, Ugliness, Injustice, and Immorality

But if history is related to Modernism, what is Modernism related to *within* history? Here the history of planning and the history of the city are more straigtforward than the general history of architecture, since in the latter case the freedom of interpretation is almost unlimited. The city can also be interpreted as, for instance, 'an expression of Man's relationship to the universe', but this becomes the more difficult, the closer we come to modern planning. One can hardly hide the crisis of the *industrial city* behind such metaphysical expressions.

The industrial city is, for modern history, a *bad* city. It is an example of something that got out of hand, bringing evil to the industrial workers as well as to the upper classes, who had to

flee the city centers into suburbs. Industrialism brought dirt and ugliness into the city, it forced the working class into intolerable living conditions, and it destroyed the foundations of traditional morality.

> Commercial speculation, social disintegration, and physical disorganization went hand in hand. At the very moment that cities were multipying in numbers and increasing in size all through Western civilization, the nature and the purpose of the city had been completely forgotten: forms for social life that the most intelligent no longer understood, the most ignorant were prepared to build. Or rather, the ignorant were completely unprepared, but that did not prevent their building.[5]

> The Industrial Revolution brings about a radical transformation. It is accompanied by a spontaneous and unprecedented urbanization which presents two faces. On the one hand new agglomerations are formed, on a gridiron plan – particularly in the United States; meanwhile the Old World experiences an upheaval in her ancient towns which revolutionizes not only *the spatial organization*, but also the mentality of the *city dweller* and the *initiative of the planner*.[6]

Actually this account is somewhat problematic, since these histories are not – which is natural – against city itself as an historical and cultural phenomenon. Why is it that the industrial city has become the mythical Kingdom of Evil, although there certainly was dirt in ancient Rome, ugliness in the workers' houses of the Valley of Kings, injustice in Athens, and immorality in Pompeii?

Or, to put it more specifically, the industrial city was certainly not the first phase in the development of cities that brought with it commercial speculation, social "disintegration", and physical "disorganization", since the latter terms can only mean a *different* social and physical organization that the societies had to face within a very short period of time. Therefore "the most intelligent" – that is, the previous social and cultural aristocracy – could not understand it. But isn't this rapid development and openness to change the very essence of the city?[7]

Similarly, many new agglomerations, on a gridiron plan, are not a unique phenomenon in urban history: compare it only to the Greek colonies during the Hellenistic period. It is, incidentally, interesting to note that the same histories that see the Industrial Revolution as a major turning point, refuse to see such drastic differences between the Classical and the Hellenistic city, although the latter clearly represented imperialism by its nature, and its physical form was based on Hippodamus' geometrical schema. For instance, Benevolo's rhetoric is telling, as he defends both the continuity and harmony of the Greek city:

> The fact that the distance between the rectangular blocks could be varied at will meant that every city was unique, and not tied to a single prototype. Also, the irregularity of the boundaries and the way in which the walls did not follow the outline of the inhabited areas meant that a balance was maintained between the natural and the man-made environment ---[8]

Theoretically, the industrial city even seems to bring into completion the tendencies that made the city possible in the first place: the division of labour, the culture of consumption, freedom from the earth by the development of new forms of communication, and the accumulation of capital. To see this as a disaster, as a *failure* of the city, is a bit awkward.

The role of early Industrialism is, apparently, that it must be seen as the 'problem', to which 19th Century social Utopias, Garden Cities, and Modernism, are 'solutions'. It must be seen as a challenge to planning, and at the same time a proof of the inadequacy of full liberalism, giving credit to the authority of planning.[9]

The problem with this line of thinking is that the Avant Garde ideologies of planning, particularly Modernism, were sympathetic to new technology and industrialism. Le Corbusier even saw the traditional urban structure with its cor-

Pieter Bruegel: *Januari*, 1565.

ridor streets as the main problem, not the structural revolution due to industrialism. Thus it has become necessary to view the industrial city in a schitzophrenic manner: as divided between technology, which was both good and necessary at the time, and social failure, which showed the inability of men to conform themselves to the new situation. Man had to be changed, thus, not his technology.

From this perspective, the paternalistic attitude of the Modern Masters becomes justified, and the story of 20th century architecture becomes logical. But it is also clear that this logic is reflected on the ancient cities as well and, thus, to the concept of the city itself.

The Eternal Village

What is the origin of the town or the city? Such a question is not simply a question of historical detail, but also a conceptual question of the *essence* of the city, as compared to other cultural forms that cannot yet be called urban forms. Thus one is easily confronted with the *village*, the form of settlement that one can find recorded from at least the Neolithic Age. The difference between this and what we may wish to call the city is dependent on our conceptual apparatus: Certain changes in quantity are given a qualitative interpretation. Thus Benevolo, for instance, finds the development of the division of labour into exploitation as the key difference:

> The city – a fully-fledged place of settlement, the aloof and priviledged seat of authority – had its roots in the village tradition, but it was not merely an enlarged village. It developed when certain categories of work were no longer carried out by the people who worked the land, but by others who were freed from this obligation and who were supported by the surplus produced by the cultivators.[10]

But since the division of labour (including administration, religion (shamanism) and trade) can be found in villages also, the emergence of the city could not mean a drastic leap to a totally different form of culture. But if we add the fact that the village is, for the modern reader, a mythical image with positive connotations, the picture becomes clearer. The village has become, in modern contexts, the symbol of the harmony between man and nature, and also the social harmony between people. In the village, man takes from the surplus of nature only what he needs, and he participates in the the natural processes, living according to weather and season. He is tightly bound to the earth and his fellow villagers. Since the village must be supported by the surrounding fields and woods (and only secondarily by trade), it cannot grow above its 'natural' size. Therefore it is also a cultural form that is not dominated by change, but rather the cyclical processes of nature.

As a dialectical opposition to this idealized image, the city easily becomes the place of disharmony, of alienation from nature and fellow citizens, of exploitation of nature as well as of people. The cities change and grow rapidly, and their well-being seems to be dependent on this growth. From the village perspective, not only the urban life of citizens, but also the life of cities themselves becomes morally questionable:

> The slow changes in the countryside (where the surplus was produced) shows how infrequently the economic structure changed, while the rapid changes in the city (where the surplus was distributed) bear witness to the way in which the composition and activities of the ruling class were constantly altering in a way that affected the whole of society. The *adventure* of civilisation had begun, and with it an era of continuous reassessment and change.[11]

Yet the myth of the village of harmony is not only the model behind the development of cities, it also has the strength to remain as the measure of value for cities, albeit in a rather distorted form. Consequently, cities are successful insofar as they have been able to retain some of the old features of the village, or else to create some new forms that have the same merits.

For instance, the cities of classical Greece are something that have to be given a positive description, not only because classical culture has been our ideal for so many centuries, but also because it is where our modern architecture is supposed to have its roots. But it is interesting to see how this merit is earned. Benevolo, after giving the above definition of the city, writes about Athens in a different tone:

> This process of self-improvement, which lasted for as long as Athens remained free and powerful, was not the result of any fixed forward planning policy; it was just a series of projects that slowly but surely gave the city its orderly appearance, and which also blended sympathetically into the natural environment. The city also possessed an extraordinary unity which derived from the cohesiveness and the sense of responsibility of all those who had participated in its development, whether rulers, planners or manual workers. Today we are grown used to differentiating between architecture, sculpture, painting and ornament, but in Athens it was impossible to draw such distinctions.[12]

Now one only has to read in Plato's dialogues how Socrates develops his arguments by making endless classifications of the different arts and crafts of classical Athens (his only reservations concerning the sophists), to become convinced

that it certainly was possible to make these distinctions already then.[13] This image of harmonious cooperation and responsibility is also doubtful, knowing the many contradictions and conflicts in early Greek society.

But historical credibility aside, this description could be interpreted as a projection of the image of the village onto the urban context. The fellow villagers have become the fellow citizens, the cooperative work that was natural and necessary in agriculture, has become the united work of building the city. The only difference is that while it is possible to give a straightforward economic explanation of this cooperation in the village, this is not so easy with the city. And, in fact, Benevolo is not even searching for such an explanation, he is constructing an image of a community that is more like a group of artists, who have a 'higher' motive for their work than mere livelihood.

Within this picture, it is possible to maintain the idea of harmony between man and nature, but in a different way. For the farmer, nature is a *living* thing, the rules of which have to be known in order to be able to live with it, collect the surplus it offers. For the artist, nature is more a natural *form*: Even its dynamic features can be chosen so that they please the eye or the mind. Benevolo continues:

> Even in the heart of the city, neither the streets nor the walls nor the monumental buildings succeeded in concealing the natural contours of the terrain; outcrops of rock and steep natural terraces were left untouched in many places, or cut away and levelled off in a way that respected their natural proportions. Buildings from past ages that had fallen into despair were often preserved and incorporated into later ones, and in this way nature and history were both kept alive in the new environment of the city.[14]

But one can hardly agree that this is a way of making nature *alive*; rather it means transforming the elements of nature into aesthetic elements, forming, with the built forms, a static composition, a *nature morte*. The romantic attitude towards nature was made possible by the growing distance between the citizen and living nature. And this distance is also the main structural explanation for the *unecological* features of modern architecture and urban planning: The original conception of nature as a process (common sense in connection with the village, scientific only after the rise of the ecological sciences) is frozen into static natural form as it has to surrender to the aesthetic conception.

The aesthetic role of nature also strengthens its symbolic nature. The 'second nature' starts to coexist as part of the cultural imagery that is used to make human development understandable. Nature comes probably second to anthropomorphic images, and very often they are mixed, as in the various attempts to describe 'healthy' forms of urban development:

> Thus, the town became a place where a true communal life could develop; in other words, the brotherhood of the monastery was extended to a more comprehensive social unit. In general, the medieval town resembles a living organism, where the wall is the hard shell and the church the delicate core. In between are the dwellings which represent an intermediate character.[15]

The result of this transformation is that the city is distanced, not only from 'real nature', but also from its economic base. The "brotherhood" that Norberg-Schulz imagines above, freed of all conflicts and exploitation, is in line with the Romantic tradition. The absolute power of guilds and religious orders could have led him into a different conception of medieval society, but it would not have suited the organic image. (In a living organism, every part is functional in its own place; the stomach could not take the place of the heart. But the bourgeoisie did, in the end, take the place of the aristocracy.)

But if the 'natural' form of the city draws attention away from natural process, as well as the city as a functional unit, it does approach

something else, namely the city as a metaphysical unit. For instance, James Curl uses the religious and Jungian mandala form (the circular form, with basic sub-divisions from the center of the circle) not only as an analytical method of describing different ideal city types, but also as the symbol of the lost unity that cities should try to reinvade:

> --- the circle or sphere is a symbol of self. They embody and symbolize the totality of the psyche in all its aspects, including the relationship between man, the universe and nature. --- The Renaissance Masters merged all consciousness into a new ordered coherence of pattern based on mandala forms. Mr. Humphrey Carver suggests in an excellent diagram that renaissance man 'imposed his own dimensions and ideals upon the total form of the city'. And what heroic dimensions they were! It is readily seen that a city designed on the mandala form becomes a symbol of psychic wholeness and exerts a specific influence on the people living there.[16]

The human dimensions and the symbolic value of the mandala form is, thus, connected to extreme environmental determinism. From the scientific perspective, expressions like these ("it is readily seen ---") sound fairly unjustified, but this is perhaps because they refer to a totally different discourse. The metaphysical, aesthetic and social 'dimensions' seem to require entirely different qualities from the arguments.

Seeing the industrial town against these images certainly gives it a shocking appearance. As a reaction, the 'village of harmony' is reintroduced, this time as a lost paradise, giving it an even brighter halo:

> Agriculture creates a balance between wild nature and man's social needs. It restores deliberately what man subtracts from the earth; while the plowed field, the trim orchard, the serried vineyard, the vegetables, the grains, the flowers, are all examples of disciplined purpose, orderly growth, and beautiful form. The process of mining, on the other hand, is destructive: the immediate product of the mine is disorganized and inorganic; and what is once taken out of the quarry or the pithead cannot be replaced. Add to this the fact that continued occupation in agriculture brings cumulative improvements to the landscape and a finer adaptation of it to human needs; while mines as a rule pass quickly from riches to exhaustion, from exhaustion to desertion, often within a few generations. Mining thus presents the very image of human discontinuity, here today and gone tomorrow, now feverish with gain, now depleted and vacant.[17]

It seems, however, that the dimensions of the industrial city make it impossible to use the idealized village as a model for the entire urban structure. The rapid growth of the cities makes their development seem like a natural force, like a storm, and planning can only concentrate on smaller units: ideal communities, new towns, neigbourhood units, and, finally, 'urban villages'. Reducing the scale makes the village model applicable in principle, but, perhaps, at the price of surrendering in front of the complexity of the whole. The industrial city thus becomes to be seen through an image at the same time familiar and horrible: villages of harmony surrounded by nature, the 'nature' being, however, the new urban chaos. Man has again attained humility, but this time in front of his own technology made alive. The 'concrete jungle' is certainly a living thing, much more than the villages he takes refuge in.

By this logic, the many Utopias of the 19th Century become precursors of the modern idea of a neighbourhood unit, where the connection with nature and basic social services are provided for. Robert Owen's "village of harmony and cooperation", as well as Fourier's Phalanstère, were based on a strict social order and a balance between the village (as reduced to central buildings) and its supporting countryside. Also the Garden City – not so much in Howard's

original exposition[18], but in the way the idea was disseminated – concentrated on the creation of a new settlement, where the balance between the people and the surrounding nature and agricultural areas was reinstated, and the size was restricted.

Paradoxically, this logic may even help us understand the serenity of Corbusian ideology. It is true that Modernism did mean a total shift from the attitude of retreat: Its heroism was based on the idea of giving planning the full responsibility of the development of the industrial city. Still, the possibility of building such contrasts between the rationality of human thought and life, on the other hand, and the wild nature of both animals and the old cities (the "way of the donkey"[19]), on the other, becomes more understandable assuming that the city had already lost its governability. In the planner's mind, it had declined into a sea of troubles, or a jungle, that the courageous hero had to invade and tame, as he had done before in the mythological past.

Notes

1. In the title of *The Poverty of Historicism*, Popper (1969).
2. Cf Manfredo Tafuri: *Theories and History of Architecture*, p. 141.
3. Curtis, W. J. R., *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, p. 11.
4. *Ibid.* p. 386.
5. Lewis Mumford:*The City in History*, p. 419.
6. Françoise Choay: *The Modern City: Planning in the 19th Century*, p. 8.
7. Cf Benevolo: "The city --- was not only larger than the village; it also evolved much faster, and thereby altered the whole tempo of civilized history." (*The History of the City*, p. 16.)
8. Benevolo, L., *The History of the City*, p. 109.
9. This can be understood against the historical fact that the very concept of town-planning (Cerdá's urbanización) was a neologism of the latter part of the nineteenth century (Choay, *ibid.* p. 7).
10. Benevolo, L., *The History of the City*, p. 16.
11. *Ibid.* pp. 16–17 (my italics).
12. *Ibid.* p. 71.
13. See, for instance, "Protagoras" in Plato, *Protagoras and Meno*, pp. 40–41 (311 in Stephanus' edition).
14. Benevolo, *ibid.* p. 72.
15. Christian Norberg-Schulz: *Meaning in Western Architecture*, p. 94.
16. Curl, J. S., *European Cities & Society*, p. 6.
17. Mumford, *ibid.* pp. 450–451.
18. It is fair to say that Howard (Howard 1898) was actually interested in the economic and political idea of creating a better environment for the working class, and he also saw the importance of urban culture, which is demonstrated in his idea of a "social city" (a network of the central city and its surrounding garden cities, connected by a rapid railway.)
19. Le Corbusier: *Urbanisme*, p. 5.

Kimmo Lapintie, Ph. D, architect, is a philosopher and planner, currently leading a research project on the normative and social aspects of the ecological city (Ecopolis – Ecological City, an Option for the Future?) in the Department of Architecture, Tampere University of Technology. He has also written and lectured on the philosophy and methodology of architecture and planning.

Bibliography

Benevolo, Leonardo (1980), *The History of the City*. Scolar Press, London. Translated by Geoffrey Culverwell (Orig. Storia della Città, Editori Laterza, Rome 1975).

Choay, Françoise (1969), *The Modern City: Planning in the 19th Century.* George Braziller, New York. Translated by Marguerite Hugo & George R. Collins.

Curl, James Stevens (1970), *European Cities and Society: A Study of the Influence of Political Climate on Town Design.* Leonard Hill, London.

Curtis, William J. R. (1987), *Modern Architecture Since 1900.* Phaidon, Oxford.

Howard, Ebenezer (1898), *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*. Swan Sonnenschein, London. (from 1902 under the title *Garden Cities of To-morrow*).

Le Corbusier (1980), *Urbanisme.* Les Éditions Arthaud, Paris. (Original edition, Éditions G. Crès et Cie, Paris 1925).

Mumford, Lewis (1961), *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*. A Harvest/HBJ Book, Harvest Brace Jovanovich Publishers. San Diego, New York and London.

Norberg-Schultz, Christian (1983), *Meaning in Western Architecture*. Rizzoli International Publications Ltd., New York. Translated by Praeger Publishers, Inc. (Orig. *Significato nell'architettura occidentale*, Electa Editrice, Milan, 1974).

Plato (1977), *Protagoras and Meno*. Translated by W. K. C. Guthrie. Penguin Books.

Popper, Karl R. (1969), *The Poverty of Historicism.* Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.

Tafuri, Manfredo (1980), *Theories and History of Architecture.* Granada Publishing Ltd., Norwich. Translated by Giorgio Verrechia (Orig. *Teorie e storia dell'architettura*, Laterza, Rome and Bari, 1968).