

Committee III  
Human Beings and the Urban  
Environment: The Future Metropolis

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for Conference Distribution Only

**DISCUSSION PAPER**

by

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on

**Dietrich Kunckel's**  
**THE LATIN AMERICAN METROPOLIS**

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## 1 - Introduction

To comment professor Kunckel's paper is simultaneously a hard and gratifying task. On one hand his text is very pleasant to read, but on the other, having produced a fine comprehensive overview of Latin American metropolitan problems he has put quite a difficult challenge to the discussant.

Usually the metropolis has been analysed according to four main aspects. These aspects may be summarized under the following headings: Cultural, Political, Technical and Economical.

Although not pretending to dismiss the importance of technology and economics, my intention is to just point out a few questions more related with the cultural and political aspects. There is no need to stress that, as almost everybody else, I am convinced of the necessity of an integrated and holistic approach to the question.

The reasoning behind this choice is double. In the first place the papers of other participants of the Conference have already stressed economic and technical issues. Secondly, it is my point of view that planners, as far as my understanding and experience of the problem allows me, should put more emphasis on culture and politics. In what follows, therefore arguments are developed for the adoption of planning metropolitan alternatives based on the abandoning of the cultural mimesis and self-assumed political neutrality or disregardness of planners.

## 2 - The Cultural Issue

In this perspective, it is possible to affirm that two basic social groups co-exist in the Latin American metropolis. The first form a subculture elite which tends to adopt imported values of the higher and middle classes of the industrialized affluent northern hemisphere countries. The second group constitutes a popular subculture characterized by rural or urban proletarian values. Management of urban and metropolitan problems, up to now, have been the exclusive province of the first group through the actions of an intellectual, governmental and private enterprising class. Being a privileged minority this group has access to high priced goods and also to relatively high quality housing and public services. Usually economic, social and technological judgements made by them are based on their own life experiences. It follows that members of the elite usually tend to idealize paradigms of other social groups similar to its own paradigm which are based on imported standards. Therefore it is easy to understand the mainspring of the divergence between quality of life concepts defined by this class and the aspirations of the majority of the population.

For the sake of the present argument, however, it should be expressed that the divergence of perception of values between the elite and the rest of the population is usually expressed in subtle ways. Analysing the brazilian context some authors have pointed out a flagrant dicotomy between academic and professional ideological discourse and action of the groups involved with urban problems. An example is given by the fact that planners

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and public officials in theory defend the necessity of putting emphasis on more efficient and energy saving public transportation systems. A close view of their concrete projects evidences that an opposite course is followed frequently. They usually adopt density and land use models that tend to perpetuate a situation of gross inefficiency, inequity and poverty throughout the field of movement and accessibility.

A closer view on a planned situation, such as Brasília, can illustrate the above referred ambiguity. It is a well known fact that the plan of Brasília was based in collective and communal values. Nevertheless because of the low density and wasteful land-use patterns used, presently its bus system has a passenger per kilometer rate five times lower than the ones of any other large Brazilian city. While high-income and affluent barrios of the same city can reach a lavish water consumption rate of 600 liters inhabitant/day, other sections, are not even provided with simple taps and pipelines. Although official and corporative documents sometimes recommend the use of more modest standards, sanitary engineers, being culturally biased, usually are prone to follow just the opposite way.

In Latin America, generally accepted concepts of planning are strongly based on American or European sociocultural patterns. Planning products, in this context, also tend to be defined as consumer goods with little regard to behavior, traditions or customs of the people. Besides the cultural aspect other problems also related to the uncritical importation of European and American values are worthwhile to mention. A very good example was given by prof. Johnson Marshall when he refers, in his Conference

paper, to the phallacy of looking at the standard of living in the city of Los Angeles as an ideal to be adopted in countries like China or India. It follows that if, for instance, urban public infrastructures and utilities are to be supplied to areas not yet provided for, clearly the standards already used in better-off or central sections of the latin american metropolis cannot be used. There is no doubt that unless the injuriously and culturally biased concepts of high and imported standards are eliminated from our professional and technical thinking, no progress will be made in the way of the provision of adequated housing, public transportation and infrastructure development for the growing population of the latin american metropolis.

### 3 - Political and institutional issues

Before proceeding with the political and institutional questions it should be noticed that there are of course exceptions to be recognized and qualifications to be made. Not all the metropolitan areas have the same problems. Even within the national boundaries of a country one is expected to find large contrasts (1). For instance, with reference to the paper presented by professor Kunckel there is just one topic where possibly what is happening in Latin America as a whole does not exactly apply to Brazil. This concerns his reference that lower income areas tendsrcy to show higher densities than the higher income areas. One of the characteristics of the brazilian urbanization is precisely the low density of fringe lower income areas. Metropolitan Peripheral sectores are usually the result of a process of land subdivision for private profit. This has lead to an enormous quantity of idle areas and also to a rather scattered

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pattern of settlement. Brasilia, as an example, has an estimated 400.000 non-utilized housing plots; the figure for São Paulo is around 1.000.000. These areas can have a legal, quasi-legal or illegal status but buildings constructed there as a rule do not obey to municipal regulations.

Regardless of regional dissimilarities, however, Latin American metropolis feature several common characteristics. Without intending to exhaust a so complex subject some questions can be put forward.

For instance, how to bring, the multifarious operations of local, state, regional and national authorities, agencies, public corporations and related bodies operating within the metropolitan territory in closer and rational conjunction? Efforts to metropolitanize government or to create supermunicipal planning agencies in the region are still incipient and can not be yet properly analysed. This is a clear political and institutional issue whose solution in spite of being beyond the urban planner's realm, needs to be searched for.

Most of the Latin American countries tend to have highly centralised national government machineries. Municipal or local administration bodies often are in a weak and powerless situation(2) In this context urban planning at the local or metropolitan level cannot perform very well.

Up to now, urban planning in Latin America has been a governmental and strictly upside down activity. Its objectives are

often meaningless to the common man or even to public administrators or politicians. In relation to this project it is also interesting to notice that the programs of the recently organized brazilian political parties do not include urban planning as a prominent issue.

According to many authors, the only hope of reversing the present trend lie in a orientation shift towards a new concept of "development from below". This would necessarily include topics such as economic and institutional decentralization, more participation of lower income groups and full utilization of the available financial and manpower resources (3). Undoubtly this is a very huge and hard task to be assumed in the years ahead not only by planners but by society as a whole as well.

Probably in this perspective the main question to be faced is how to overcome the gap between planning and society. In order to make planning a meaningful activity, planners urgently need to express their aims and objectives in a language that can be easily grasped by the affected social groups. They are also called to identify where in the social structure there is receptivity to a more collective approach of attacking the pressing urban and metropolitan problems.

#### 4 - Conclusions

Finally there is a last topic to be pondered. Most of the nations of the region are nowadays amidst an economic and political turmoil (large external debts and internal deficits) that contributes for rapidly worsening an already very deteriorated

social environment. This crisis doubtless it is bound to profoundly affect in one way or the other the issues discussed in the conference.

Some authors argue, maybe otimistically, that Latin Americas countries can benefit from the crisis. This is true, at least in the sense that it provide sus with an opportunity to change direction and to learn some lesson.

Presently in many large brazilian urban agglomerations, on account of the severe budget deficits, federal, metropolitan and municipal authorities are already progressively changing their initial relience on very huge and costly public works. Emphasis now tends to be placed on inexpensive small projects. In the transportation sector, for instance, the new approach tries to combine effective traffic managment with integrated public facilities (4).



## Notes

- (1) The Brazilian metropolitan areas of Curitiba and Fortaleza, although with similar institutional roles (both are state capitals), and roughly the same population, have quite different potentials of development. While the first is a city relatively well equipped heading a southern burgeoning middle class metropolitan area, the second is an impoverished and depleted metropolis with almost endemic unemployment located in the Northeast. Hence, solutions to problems of one specific area cannot be easily extended to other situations.
- (2) In Brazil municipalities are politically autonomous powers in just the formal sense of the word, since they are heavily dependent on the transfer of financial resources from the Federal Government.
- (3) See, for instance: a) KNESI, John - Town and Country Development from below: The Emerging Paradigm for the Decade Ekistics 292, Jan-Feb, 1982, p. 14-22, b) SAFIER, Michael - Habitat for Development: An Action Planning Approach in: Report of Proceedings Town and Country Planning Summer School (RTPI). September 1974. Exeter, England. p. 72-79.
- (4) A recent, inexpensive and very interesting project was implanted in São Paulo and is worthwhile to be mentioned. It can be summarized in a few words. The problem to be solved was how to speed up the circulation of buses in a rather

congested bus lane in a down town area. In this bus lane 56 different lines circulated. Initially, the Municipal traffic Engineering Department classified the 56 lines into three colour groups (green, yellow and blue). Curbs of the required bus stops on the bus lane were also painted into the 3 same colour groups in order to facilitate the access to the vehicles by waiting passengers. The traffic engineers adapted the device of making the buses leave the terminal in groups of six (2 buses of each colour) and head out for the bus lane. The buses should then circulate down the lane jointly, all stopping at the same time in front of the curbs painted with their defined colour. This process continues until their turn off point from the lane. As a result, time of circulation was reduced from a previous 26 minutes to 16 minutes. A gain of an estimated 400.000 liters of diesel oil per annum was also obtained. See: SZASZ, Pedro A. COMONOR: Comboio de Ônibus Ordenados. Boletim técnico da CET, nº 22. CET, São Paulo, 1979.

## APPENDIX I

Brazilian Urban Agglomerations and Metropolitan Areas - 1970-1980 (1)

(in thousands)

| <u>Area</u>           | <u>1970</u> | <u>1980</u> | <u>Rate of Growth</u> |              |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------------|--------------|
|                       |             |             | <u>60-70</u>          | <u>70-80</u> |
| São Paulo             | 8.206       | 12.708      | 5.53                  | 4.47         |
| Rio de Janeiro        | 7.173       | 9.153       | 3.62                  | 2.47         |
| Belo Horizonte        | 1.628       | 2.584       | 6.25                  | 4.73         |
| Recife                | 1.824       | 2.399       | 3.93                  | 2.78         |
| Porto Alegre          | 1.554       | 2.284       | 4.19                  | 3.92         |
| Salvador              | 1.170       | 1.795       | 4.77                  | 4.37         |
| Fortaleza             | 1.053       | 1.615       | 4.87                  | 4.37         |
| Curitiba              | 838         | 1.471       | 5.04                  | 5.79         |
| Belém                 | 665         | 1.016       | 4.85                  | 4.32         |
| Brasília              | 546         | 1.202       | 11.56                 | 8.22         |
| Goiânia               | 512         | 975         | 8.43                  | 6.64         |
| Campinas              | 382         | 680         | 5.99                  | 5.94         |
| Natal                 | 270         | 428         | 5.21                  | 4.73         |
| Santos                | 350         | 424         | 2.80                  | 1.94         |
| São Luiz              | 270         | 400         | 5.42                  | 5.45         |
| Teresina              | 230         | 388         | 5.69                  | 5.39         |
| João Pessoa           | 228         | 338         | 4.17                  | 3.82         |
| Aracajú               | 186         | 299         | 4.91                  | 4.84         |
| Sorocaba              | 177         | 273         | 3.92                  | 9.39         |
| Jundiaí               | 170         | 261         | 4.93                  | 4.40         |
| Vitória               | 136         | 215         | 4.81                  | 4.66         |
| Florianópolis         | 143         | 195         | 3.83                  | 3.18         |
| Taubaté - Temembé     | 112         | 171         | 3.64                  | 4.32         |
| Barra Mansa-V.Redonda | 102         | 160         | 4.88                  | 4.59         |

Source: Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística/IBGE

## Note

- (1) São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Recife, Porto Alegre, Salvador, Fortaleza, Curitiba and Belém are designated Metropolitan Areas.