

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

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**THE METROPOLIS IN CONTEXT**

by

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The metropolis is immensely difficult to comprehend and impossible to define in precise terms. In the past it was said that the city was the most complex work of the human species, comparable in nature to the ant hill or the beehive. The city was also held to be humanity's highest achievement, and the key place where human society, through multifarious intercommunication, could evolve and develop to a higher level of civilization. It was only natural for people to think that as the metropolis replaced the city as the largest urban entity, so it inherited the role of the city in terms of civilization.

Patrick Geddes, the pioneer of so many innovative ideas in physical planning, was one of the first to realize that a new and menacing scale of urbanization was taking place in industrial society. For this he coined the word conurbation, which he thought, "... may serve as the necessary word, as an expression of this new form of population-grouping which is already, as it were sub-consciously, developing new forms of social grouping and of definite government and administration .....", and he likened the growth of London the first conurbation, to "...the spreadings of a great coral reef."<sup>1</sup> It is important to remember that the word conurbation had a pejorative meaning, whereas metropolis has the opposite.

More recently, Jean Gottman<sup>2</sup> identified an even larger urban grouping, and for this he re-used another ancient Greek word, megapolis. No doubt, if megapolis increases in size, it will be necessary to invent yet another word in the space scale.<sup>3</sup> For a number of reasons this may not be necessary. A new method of evaluation has evolved, different in kind from the centuries old/

1. Geddes, P.; Cities in Evolution, Chapter 2; London, 1915.

2. Gottman, J.; Megapolis, Introduction; Cambridge, Mass., 1961.

3. Doxiades' Ecumenopolis was a different conception.

old tradition by which urban man has dominated thinking and hence the making of decisions about societies and cities.

At last new concepts are appearing and are already conditioning ideas about human settlements. These concepts achieved their threshold of acceptance at the United Nations Conference on the Environment held in Stockholm in 1972. This Conference brought about widespread realization that the days of the terrestrial 'frontier' were over. No longer was it possible to accept the tendency of the human species to expand indefinitely over the planet, often moving over the face of the earth like a swarm of locusts and destroying, in many cases, the vital resources on which they depended.

The new approach, for which the term ecology has come to be used, related the human species to planetary resources as a whole. An alarming situation was disclosed, which now after 12 years, has almost been forgotten by most of the politicians of the world.

From the point of view of human survival, the land capable of sustaining the basis of life was limited, and was often the very land that was being used, or misused, for other purposes, notably uncontrolled urbanization. The mineral resources of the planet were also being exploited in an irresponsible way, so that some geologists predicted that a number of basic minerals would become unavailable within a comparatively short period. At the same time world population was increasing, notably in developing countries, where survival problems were already acute for the existing population.

The world strategical appraisal, therefore, indicated that a dangerous situation was developing with increasing rapidity, and one which would be impossible to resolve even in the near future, unless drastic action was taken. Even more critically, the large scale movement of people from villages to towns and from towns to metropolitan areas was causing acute problems.

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A fundamental dilemma was presented. Traditionally, the problem of total human happiness was seen as a readjustment in the distribution of resources, so that all, instead of a few, could take advantage of nature's bounty. Assuming unlimited resources, the only problem was to ensure fair shares for all.

In some respects, this has been partially achieved in a few countries, where no-one starves, everyone has the minimum necessary clothing, and the majority have a minimum standard of shelter. Thus, basic needs for all have been satisfied, comforts are becoming available for large numbers, while luxuries are confidently expected in the near future. This prediction implies an ever increasing use of land and resources; and, if the experience of the world's richest country is anything to go by, it will be accompanied by conspicuous waste.

In the conventional dream of tomorrow's world the metropolis assumed almost a magical role, like the ancient image cities of Babylon or Rome, in which all the physical necessities, comforts, and luxuries of life would be available if only one could get there. How else can one explain the magnetic effect which has caused the mass migrations to metropolitan areas in recent years? Although the harsh realities of the new mass slums of the metropolitan areas in developing countries have destroyed the dream for millions, the thought of returning to their villages would be an even greater nightmare. All the while the impossibility of providing even the basic necessities of urban life brings disaster nearer. The problems are less evident in the metropolitan areas of developed countries. In Los Angeles, for instance, it is not so much the conspicuous waste of land and resources that is critical, but the very concept of the way of life presented to the world; a way of life to be striven for as an ideal. One only needs simple arithmetic to expose the fallacy, for if one applied the ideal standard of living of Los Angeles in/

in material terms to China and India, an impossible dilemma would be revealed. If, for instance, every Chinese family were to have two cars, the depletion of metal resources alone would cause an international crisis.

The problem, therefore, is obvious in principle, but insoluble without a basically different approach. The solution is also obvious but difficult to accept, particularly by metropolitan society as it exists today.

It begins with a consideration of the spatial problem as a whole. Human survival is the keynote, and the bedrock for assumptions for the future. It depends on the best use of terrestrial resources of all kinds. In consequence, the long held assumptions of the "frontier" are called into question.

If the human species is to survive, fundamentally new assumptions must be made. There is only so much space available, so much land capable of growing food in a non-destructive way, so many mineral resources, and a limited amount of land for urbanization. The need for the best use of resources is brought sharply into focus by current attitudes to the world's forests.

The large scale depletion being practised at the present time is not only reducing the amount of timber that will be available in the future, but it is causing widespread erosion, and complex climatic changes which may be irreversible.

The terrestrial inventory, therefore, enables human society to take a new look at the world, and at the metropolitan phenomenon within a broader context. As metropolitan growth has been based partly on the general assumption of unlimited terrestrial resources, so a new approach to the metropolitan problem is necessary, based on a new concept of human aspirations in physical terms. In the past, two opposing theories have been advanced. One is that the metropolis is an indicator of economic viability and vitality, and hence must have no restrictions placed on its growth. The other is that the metropolis must be controlled negatively, and be forced into a restrictive limit/

limit of growth concept, which will cause it to be contained spatially.

Not many years ago, Lewis Mumford argued for a new approach, with an emphasis on the invisible city. Of the metropolis he wrote, ".....those who work within the metropolitan myth treating its cancerous tumours as normal manifestations of growth will continue to apply poultices, salves, advertising incantations, public relations magic, and quack mechanical remedies until the patient dies before their own failing eyes."<sup>1</sup> He argued for networks of human settlements rather than one gargantuan urban "necropolis".

To-day, with the advantages of the terrestrial ecological approach, we see that the concepts flowing from Geddes, Kropotkin, Howard, Benton Mackaye and Mumford have largely retained their validity. The added advantage we have now is to be able to stand outside and above the metropolis, both mentally and physically, with the aid of Landsat and other devices, and to be able to balance urban and non-urban, to give plants as great an importance as people, and thus to see the metropolis as it exists today as an exorbitant consumer of human and natural resources, as a kind of brainless giant uncontrolled and uncontrollable, an enemy of good ecological principles; and finally, unnecessary, at least in its present form.

Any ideas for its resolution must have general validity, and must be applicable to New York and Sao Paolo, Calcutta and Bangkok, and to all the other metropolitan areas.

We need to start with the basic needs of the human being, with the satisfaction of the necessities of life, some of the comforts, and perhaps one or two of the luxuries. From the human person it is necessary to proceed to the family, from the family to the community, and from the community to society as a whole.

Armed with the knowledge that most of the benefits of civilization can be obtained throughout any given area by the use of appropriate technology, a network of settlements can be established which would make the metropolis in its/

1. Lewis Mumford, The City in History, New York, 1961.

its present form not only unnecessary but less desirable. It would be metamorphosed into a higher order of living, with the invisible city becoming a reality, and a self-sustaining and harmonious distribution of settlements throughout a region as the new viable and vital pattern for life in the future.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty is that of perception. Many people think that as metropolis in its present form exists, therefore it is inevitable. Fortunately, history has accustomed us to realize that any illness affecting the human species can be cured over a period, given a collective will. The need is to diagnose the problem, to analyse the causes, and to prescribe a cure that is accepted as necessary by human society as a whole.

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