

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

Second Draft --
for Conference Distribution Only

DISCUSSION PAPER

by

Adriaan Constandse
Head
Socio-Economic Research Department
Ijsselmeer Development Authority
Almere, Netherlands

Discussion Paper

on

Klaus Mueller-Ibold
THE EUROPEAN METROPOLIS

The Thirteenth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences
Washington, D.C. September 2-5, 1984

© 1984, Paragon House Publishers

1/2

At the end of the nineteenth century Europe was the most urbanized part of the world. Now, the largest metropolitan areas are found outside Europe and the fastest growth is observed in a number of developing countries.


Apparently the processes of urbanisation in the developing countries are of a different nature compared to the genesis of the European urban pattern. Of such a different nature even that it is doubtful to some whether the study of the European situation is of any relevance for the planning of the future metropolis. This is not my viewpoint. I think it is of utmost importance for the quality of urban planning wherever in the world it may be, to know what the role of history is in the development of such a variety of human settlements as Europe possesses. Although it is true that history never repeats itself in identical forms, it is also true that he who does not learn from history is bound to relive it.

Because history is so important I think Europe should be studied as a whole. Urbanisation in socialist countries may be so specific that it deserves separate study, on the other hand the cities in Eastern Europe are older than socialism and very European in character.

The reasons why cities were formed in the course of time are many and that again causes that there are many types of cities and that there is a rather irregular pattern of dispersal and concentration. In time there are also processes of growth and decline because of changing political powers, development of resources or invalidation

of these resources, through competition. In Ancient Times cities came up and sometimes disappeared, leaving only ruins (Troy, Carthage, Efesus). Later destroyed and declined cities were mostly rebuilt at the same place, perhaps because the existing infrastructure could be used. In modern times the physical structures, the built areas represent such a huge investment that the existing urban areas have a strong tendency to stay in use even if the original functions lost significance and are reconstructed after damage through war or natural disasters. Built by people the cities have, once they are there, an influence on people. They have a specific character, represent a culture. On the one hand cities, as knots of communication absorb and diffuse change and are the carriers of the growth of a world-culture with many common traits (skyscraper, blue jeans, Muppet-show), on the other hand the older (european) cities conserve by having roots in the past the local, regional or national culture. This latter fact is neglected too much in urban studies. Europe is notwithstanding the establishment of some large nation-states, notwithstanding the unification or federation of smaller states, or the forming of political and economic communities, still a culturally very diversified area where many languages and dialects are spoken.

The absence of large centralized states until recent times in most parts of Europe has certainly a significance in relation to the fact that there are so many moderately sized cities and only two, London and Paris, are large enough to carry the title of metropolis. It is difficult to say for sure whether the large centralized states came



so late - as in the cases of Italy and Germany - because of the fact that there were of old patterns of small urban centres, or that the patterns remained intact because of the absence of the centralized states. Whatever the reason may be (probably both reasons play a role), the existing pattern seems to be strong. Of course changes in political boundaries have an influence on the development processes: if the Austro-Hungarian monarchy would be still in existence then perhaps Vienna-Prague-Budapest-Bratislava would be a kind of megalopolis now. History caused a different way of events. Mozart moved easier and perhaps as fast from one city to the other than the modern traveller does, but the cities are there, with their own character, very distinct. Spain, once a world power, has a capital which is a rather big city, but rather strong urban centres are found all over the country, in a number of cases with such a strong identity as regional capitals that it leads to tension and even violence.

By studying the European town one can of course not take all individual historical peculiarities into account and one should look for common traits. But in a comment to the main paper, in which some headlines are drawn, it seems necessary to stress these peculiarities a little, because the statistics can be misleading.

For instance the relation between urbanity and density of population. An illustration: The Netherlands is always described as one of the most densely populated countries of the world. But it is a small country without mountains, deserts or tundras. The State Nordrhein-Westfalen scores just as high, as well as the south-east of England or the north-east of the USA.

Sweden has a low density but is certainly not a rural country. Some densely populated countries have no big cities (Netherlands), others have a smaller population but one big city, such as Greece, where about half of the population lives in the Athens-region.

But if one leaves out the national boundaries and makes a map of Europe then it is possible to discover such a dense zone as what is called the It-Brit-axis. It suggests that this zone is some socio-economic-spatial system, which is, however, very doubtful, lying in seven different countries where at least five languages are spoken, with different levels of development, different types of government, trade-relations etc.

Even on a smaller scale one should be careful with the interpretation of maps. The Dutch Randstad or Greenheart Metropolis belongs with its 6 million inhabitants to the happy few of the world-cities. But on close view it appears to be a group of rather distinct rather small towns, with scattered building in between and the heart not as green as the planners wanted it.

The majority of the European population lives not in very big cities. Nevertheless the phenomenon of stagnation and even decline of the metropolis which has been observed in the industrialized countries manifests itself also in urban areas of smaller size. It is too often described as an exodus and a dangerous process for the cities. For a part it is no more than a (healthy) decrease of the average number of people per dwelling. Just as in the 19th century the countryside was not 'depopulated' but was relieved of overpopulation through the growth of the cities, just now are the overpopulated urban areas relieved by out-migration

The problem is not so much that the central cities are losing inhabitants, but that the migration is selective, leaving the poor, the young and the old, as well as the deviants in the town. Of course this is a problem for urban management and if managed not well a real threat for the existence of the city. But it can also be seen as a challenge to look for better solutions concerning inequalities between population categories. Perhaps it implies also that new ideas about space-time budgets and about integration and segregation of age- and status-groups should be developed.

A fact is that the value of the metropolis and the big city is the centre, downtown where the action is. This kind of urbanity can only exist on basis of a large number of people supporting such a centre, for activities of the highest order: millions of people. A fact is also that the majority of the people in the metropolis do not and cannot live in the centre and that the vast residential areas around the centre are not experienced as attractive. Many, probably most people like to live in semi-urban/rural environments. This does not mean that these people do or want to loose contact with the city. Further is a fact that some categories of people in a certain period of their life like to live 'downtown' and they are mostly young people. If the idea of balanced communities as a goal in planning would be abolished, the wishes of both categories could be fulfilled. Rearing the children in green and quiet suburbs, maturing of youth in exciting city centres, getting old where it suits the wishes best.

This implies that mobility should be accepted as a positive value: mobility of dwelling-place as well as daily mobility between living, work, services and recreation.

For many planners this aspect is difficult to swallow.

Mobility means traffic, energy-consumption, pollution, deterioration of landscape qualities. None of these disadvantages should be bagatellized. They are serious problems. Nevertheless I think that an increase of the quality of life in urban environments is not solely arrived at by reducing mobility and promotion of living in higher density.

This does not mean that urban sprawl should be admitted.

People should live in concentrations of such a size that adequate systems of public transportation can operate and the use of the private car in commuting is discouraged.

It is important to bundle the traffic in corridors in order to preserve the open countryside between the cities.

In Europe several examples can be found of urbanized regions where many people live in moderately sized cities and small settlements. The case of The Netherlands has been mentioned already. Another case is the Swiss Mittelland. In such areas a busy commuter-movement is found but in the settlements a rather stable population exists. Many people live near or virtually in the countryside and have urban facilities never far away. It gives opportunities for the maintenance and creation of differentiated environments for living. With a growing proportion of people having no job or having a part-time occupation and with rapidly improving means of telecommunication, there is much to say in favour of this mixing of town and country and it might offer an alternative to the different models of the future metropolis.

In existing situations the movement to the smaller settlements has the disadvantage that the derelict areas in the old cities, where outdated industry has disappeared and even offices move to the periphery, remain derelict. The erosion of the older cities is a major, but probably a temporary problem. With concerted effort, for example by using the organizations which developed the new towns (as is done in Britain) the cities can probably be revitalized.

Of crucial importance is that the centre of the towns is lively and attractive and is visited by many people often. This may be of more importance - that many people use the centre than that many people live in and around it. Of course this is a somewhat provocative statement to stimulate the discussion. A fact is that the built-up area as a gathering place for people living dispersed, is supposed to be older than the city as a place to dwell: in Delphi and Olympia there were no permanent inhabitants, except a number of priests. So centres without permanent residents, but having a function for a large population are not new. It is not possible to work this point further out in a short paper, but if it is realized that in the centre of a big city the people in the streets, in the restaurants, the theatres, are for the larger part visitors, many of them residing in hotels, it will be understood what is meant.

All ideas about the future metropolis remain wishful thinking without clear ideas about government and the necessary political support. In many cases the municipalities are not able to manage the metropolis or urban region. This leads

to interference of national governments in local affairs. It is often stated that government should be decentralized and the old municipalities restructured. But for the citizen the neighbourhood and the national state are the only real things. The region means much less for the individual. If one region has a certain policy, and another region another policy, leading to different taxes or different restrictions this may cause a lot of disturbance because the citizen is used to national policies treating every individual in the same way. Centralisation, although not 'en vogue' has its advantages.

Concerning the values at stake in the main paper some remarks. Although I am inclined to support them in essence, there remain some questions.

More freedom for the individual, some deregulation, sounds attractive, but if it will be possible in matters of physical planning is doubtful. There are so many conflicting interests that it is hard to believe that people can solve their own problems in an informal way.

More power for local councils: it has been argued above that there are dangers.

Respect for history: I agree. Between brackets is stated: not mummifying. But that is what often happens in Europe now. If respect for the past is inspired only by dislike of the present, then it does not stimulate creativity.

I hope that these remarks will contribute to the start of a constructive discussion.