

IN DEFENSE OF THE METROPOLIS

by

Adam Krivatsy
Principal
The HKS Collaborative
San Francisco, California

Discussion Paper

on

Rebecca Robertson's

**URBAN SETTLEMENT PATTERNS IN
THE NORTH AMERICAN METROPOLIS**

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INTRODUCTION

Ms. Rebecca Robertson's paper on urban development in North America must be commended: It represents an excellent starting point for creative discussion, it will serve as a valuable data base, and it incorporates many valuable observations about urban America.

Reading the paper reinforced my conviction that there is no practical reason to search for the "ideal" metropolis! It appears that each metropolitan area has its own particular setting and peculiar circumstances that warrant consideration, suggest a unique approach and dictate special solutions. How could the urban ills of Los Angeles and the San Francisco region be solved by applying the same cure? We must keep working toward a better Los Angeles, a more livable Bay Area, and then we may achieve better urban conditions in each metropolitan community!

Pondering practical means of making our metropolitan communities more livable, it becomes evident that what urban America needs is not an ideal solution for some time in the future, but the best possible solution now, today, every day of the year!

Aiming for the most livable cities in the present does not preclude thinking about the future. On the contrary: It requires constant vigilance, planning and preparation, so that the public sector can provide urban systems that will accommodate future

needs. We must continue to monitor trends, maintain intelligence and prepare for the future with improvement programs often carried out in public-private partnership.

Some of this is being pursued today. We just have to carry on, learn from our past mistakes, be more thoughtful and more effective, avoid fashionable cliches; and assure that our plans are circumspect, that our actions are timely, and that solutions are custom-tailored for each particular situation.

If we can accomplish this, people in North America will enjoy life in the "ideal" metropolis -- as ideal as imperfect human beings can create on earth.

RELATED THOUGHTS

In 1964, Hans Blumenfeld defined the metropolis as "a form of human settlement that consists of a core city and its hinterland which may include a number of smaller urban units forming a total entity with its parts in intricate interaction." Professor Blumenfeld set the minimal population size of the metropolis at 500,000 inhabitants.

The main purpose of Ms. Robertson's paper is to explore factors that shape urban settlement patterns in North America, and to "consider creative responses to problems associated with metropolitan growth," as it is experienced in our (wealthy) society.

As a student of urban development, and as a resident of the San Francisco Bay Area, I wish to add the following observations.

In examining the "diminishing" role of central cities in metropolitan areas, Ms. Robertson refers to the "rise and fall" of the North American metropolis. She invokes memories of the metropolis as something "great," suggesting the Babylon or Rome of ancient times. This reference may be misleading, since no contemporary metropolis has "risen" to greatness! Consequently, there could not be a subsequent "fall" either. However great or complex they may be, human settlements always have their weak sides -- their slums, their open sewers, their lack of security, their inadequate sanitation -- and it is up to us, the students of urban evolution, to find ways of reducing the liabilities associated with urban life.

We must remember the axiom, that the form of human/urban settlements are mere reflections of the society of those times, and that -- individual and communal -- human lives must be seen always in transition. Consequently, reference to the "rise and fall" of the metropolis as the contemporary pattern of urban settlement implies that the metropolis may become the answer to our past urban problems! By now, we may suspect that humanity will never find the perfect answer!

Today we know, and perhaps we have always known, that in investigating the metropolis as a contemporary form of urban settlement, we observe a complex form of urban life in transition. Such transitions have taken place in settlements every time human existence was affected by new forces or new opportunities. The advent of gunpowder and cannons made city walls useless, and caused towns to open up to the surrounding countryside. Much later, trolley cars and other forms of public transportation have expanded the mobility -- and the effective radius of concentric urban settlements. Finally, the combustion engine and the conveyor belt, as imaginatively applied by Henry Ford, have caused the urban environment to explode into a virtually unlimited system of settlements and services.

Until another breakthrough in technology opens up new horizons for human life, we will have to think of the urban "plant" as a complex system of public and private improvements that is constantly refined and changed to meet new needs, to better serve its inhabitants. As with any system exposed to heavy use, the urban infrastructure is also in need of constant re-investment, constant repair. Newly created, or redeveloped, parts of the urban environment offer better life than the older, worn-down neighborhoods. These new, or renewed, parts of the city are the most expensive, and therefore will serve the wealthiest segments of society. The run-down portions of urban American will always accommodate the poor. As urban

neighborhoods change hands, the life of the metropolis takes different forms; The City must re-orient itself.

By applying this logic, we may very well conclude that constant mobility is a characteristic feature of any metropolitan environment. The rate of this mobility will depend on 1) periodic in-migration and the pressure it exerts on the city, and 2) the cycle within which the well-to-do will "hand down" their "discarded" neighborhoods to successively less affluent social groups -- until the substandard "plant" is ready for redevelopment, and a new cycle begins.

There will be always portions of the urban environment which are developed luxuriously, according to the latest standards. When this environment is in the central city, the metropolis will be a "center-dominated" urban environment. When the best housing, services -- and perhaps jobs -- desert the central city for the suburbs, then we must not talk about the decay of the metropolis. Rather, we should accept this phenomenon as a new form of metropolitan life. Several of the large West Coast cities have such "split personalities." While the business life and cultural facilities (fine arts!) are firmly established in intensively developed urban cores, the best residential environments -- and many good jobs -- can be found in suburban communities.

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A problem associated with this condition on the West Coast is the loss of manufacturing and service jobs in the central city -- at a time when most of the inexpensive, and often unskilled, labor is housed in the old, central neighborhoods. This labor does not have the means to pay for "reverse commute" to outlying jobs! Thus, we may be approaching the time of the three-tiered metropolis -- a metropolis with a small, vigorous commercial/cultural core encircled by outdated urban fabric, housing, industries and the associated labor. These two tiers would be surrounded by the most attractive living and working environment: a "multi-nodal" belt of suburban settlements.

This new, "balanced" form of metropolis must accommodate a growing number of households, while being supported by a stable number of inhabitants. It will house its immigrants and urban poor in neighborhoods "handed down" by the more established, more affluent residents. Yet, in no way, will this metropolis resemble the cities of Asia and South America, which are so heavily affected by immigrants from the agricultural regions.

In her review of the North American metropolis, Ms. Robertson points out that the central cities have relinquished their role as "centers of economic and cultural activity." On the West Coast we have observed the opposite trend: Most of the major cities in California, Oregon, Washington, and British

Columbia have experienced a boom in office construction, and many of them enjoy a renaissance in their cultural lives -- building new symphony halls, museums, ballet theatres and domed sports arenas. While sometimes embarrassed by the homeless sleeping in doorways, central cities on the West Coast are in the process of rejuvenation, and are indeed centers of the economic and cultural life in their respective regions!

Based on U.S. Census figures, Ms. Robertson also concludes that there is a "flight to the suburbs" by urban singles and young couples. Contrary to this national trend, this does not occur in Vancouver, Seattle, Portland and San Francisco. In these coastal cities, young people prefer to live near the "action" that the urban centers represent. Suburban housing stock is not built for the needs and means of the younger set.

In examining urban trends, Ms. Robertson refers to the phenomenon of "gentrification" as a counter-current to the exodus to the suburbs. In Los Angeles and San Francisco, the gentrification process does not represent a "return to the city." Run-down neighborhoods are being re-built primarily by young professionals ("Yuppies" or "Yumpies") who wish to invest in urban neighborhoods by improving real estate they can afford, and by young architect/builders who see this as a way of combining their professional skills with a compatible business. Most of these "new" urban homesteaders have never lived in the suburbs!

In her paper Ms. Robertson treats the suburbs as a world quite separate from the metropolis. However, in Los Angeles and the smaller metropolitan areas related to major West Coast cities, the suburbs exist as natural parts of the metropolitan environments. Indeed, on the West Coast, suburbs represent -- what Professor Blumenfeld calls -- the "hinterland" functioning in the form of "small urban units."

In speculating about the future, Ms. Robertson points out that while in the past, industries sought low-cost labor markets, today employers also seek good communication and cheap energy. According to the Urban Land Institute, key determinants for locating new industries are: 1) desirable living environment (including affordable housing), 2) established community facilities and services, and 3) brainpower normally associated with institutions of higher education.

In essence, new industries are primarily concerned with attracting the necessary educated and skilled labor force. They can hope to achieve this most successfully in places where housing is available at reasonable cost, where urban systems are already present, and where employees can pursue -- what has become quite critical these days -- a program of continued education. ULI points out that, contrary to past trends, these conditions are present in most East Coast communities which have been "abandoned" by industries seeking cheaper

labor in the South. An intriguing idea -- which has been proven true by the success of the Route 128 Corridor in the Boston metropolitan area!

THE FUTURE

In USA. As long as city building will remain in private hands and land prices will reflect perceived or real **development potential**, we cannot plan for an "ideal" urban environment. Yet the "present" always reflects the best attainable environment at that particular time and place.

We must be prepared to accept the cyclic change, wherein the wealthy will choose first -- whether lifestyle or environment, center city, suburb or otherwise. At the other end of the spectrum, the urban poor -- or, in many cases, the new immigrants -- will always occupy the least desirable quarters, presently the outdated neighborhoods of the central city.

In the foreseeable future, the urban form/environment will be shaped by the same forces that are in effect today, primarily urban land economics, responsive to the real estate market place. New urban environment will be built by private entrepreneurs in response to market demand, and for profit.

When potential profits are large, the regulatory agencies will have leverage to shape the urban form. In leaner times, those who will be ready to take risks will be more free to "get away" with projects that may not be in keeping with the mold prescribed by public policy.

Development intensities will continue to reflect the cost of land, and vice versa. As urban population grows and as the need to preserve agricultural land gains recognition, land costs will rise. Real estate will have to be used more intensively than in the past -- at the cost of privacy and perhaps at the loss of grace.

Ms. Robertson's paper suggests that, with minor exceptions, the USA and Canada are on the right track in guiding metropolitan growth. Presently this is accomplished through policies and incentives that safeguard valued amenities, and encourage developers to build urban environments in response to our needs. In the West Coast cities, the planning process is slow and democratic. While the driving force and direction for development and redevelopment is the marketplace, the planning process plays a responsible, guiding role. Through this constant building and reconstruction process, we can make our metropolis young and livable, regardless of its specific urban structure.