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

Second Draft --
for Conference Distribution
Only

DISCUSSION PAPER

by

Ervin Lazlo

Director
UNITAR
New York, N.Y.

on

Denis John Dwyer's
The Metropolis in its National and Regional Context

and

A.M. O'Connor's
The Metropolis and Tropical Africa

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

© 1984, Paragon House Publishers

1/2

In the opening pages of his paper, O'Connor has already provided a valuable
commentary on Dwyer's paper, and it remains for me merely to fill in some
additional dimensions, commenting at the same time on Dwyer's paper and
on O'Connor's commentary thereon (the rest of C'Connor's paper being taken
up with assessments of cities in tropical Africa - a useful case study, but
a case study and not a general framework nevertheless except for the
Conclusions, to which I shall return).

The first point to make is the affirmation of the validity of Dwyer's
final conclusion: "urbanisation and metropolitan formation are not single,
universally similar processes but rather assume different forms and
meanings depending upon historic, economic, social and cultural conditions."
O'Connor is entirely right when he says that differentiation in the process
of urbanisation and metropolitan formation is so divergent in different
regions that we should not even think of a 'developed' and a 'developing'
country model or standard but envisage rather an entire spectrum of processes,
encompassing a series of culture realms. Hall's general model (quoted by
Dwyer) of a single sequential-stage model of urban evolution is esthetically
pleasing but empirically false. It is reminiscent of the now quasi-abandoned
'railroad' theories of development which likewise envisaged a single
development process consistenting of different phases. Developing and
developed countries are located at different points along a single 'track'--
developed countries further down the line toward some vaguely discerned
terminus called 'the developed condition' while developing countries lagging
behind various distances, depending on their particular level of under-
development. (The 'developed condition' seems to vacillate between one where
each citizen can have all the reasonable fruits of civilization provided
he or she earns or manages money and does not break the law, and a state
where traffic jams, heart disease and the other ills and illnesses of
civilization color the enjoyment of life, making up the pattern of 'urban,

civilized living'.) Dwyer and Hall are quite right in pointing out that
the process of urbanisation in the developing world is vastly different
from that in developed countries and that, in consequence, no single
multiple-stage model can apply to all. However, their conclusions seem
rather weak, while the suggested solutions border on the utopian. Faced with
the continued concentration of population in Third World cities, Dwyer
suggests that job sharing and splitting could ensure an "almost indefinite
increase in a metropolitan population". This is highly questionable, given
that the great majority of Third World metropolitan populations are already
living on the edge of survival. Any more 'splitting' of the meager
job opportunities which exist in the 'informal' sectors of these cities
(which are not jobs at all in the Western, industrialized country sense
but ways of squeezing out a living by doing whatever can be done under
extremely deprived circumstances)--any more splitting of such jobs and
the 'self-employed' of this sector will cross the line from the edge of
starvation to below. It does not follow, therefore, that the developing
countries will in the near future see the emergence of metropoli of enormous
size, such as Mexico City with 31 millions, Shanghai with 22 millions and
Bombay with 17 millions. These population projections are academic in face
of the stark reality of Third World urban life. In some cases there are
very definite upper limits to further population growth and concentration,
for example, the water supply in Mexico City (a city located on a high plateau
which could not, by natural means, supply anything near the projected 31
million people), and in others the limits are sewage disposal, health
facilities, and even the tiniest survival-ensuring job possibilities.
At the edge of survival the result is not a simple population decompression,
as constraints push the excess population outwards, but epidemics, social
breakdown, political unrest and a generalized system-breakdown. That we
have not experienced precisely this kind of breakdown before does not mean
that it cannot take place: we have never before had quite as many millions
concentrated quite so densely in any one place. This is a qualitatively new

phenomenon.   It is rather weak to conclude, as Dwyer does, that these

metropoli will be"characterised by extensive poverty and by occupations

marginal to the relatively small core of 'formal' ones.... /and/ also...

by continued concentration, if only because of the inability of the vast

majority of their population to pay for much intra-urban transport."

The reality will be intolerable d£stitution and disoccupation, with no

question of formality or informality of employment and ability to pay

(for the anyway hardly existent) urban transport. What will happen after

the year 2000, which statisticians like to quote in connection with urban

                         in the Third World
population figures? If/concentration would continue (and nobody can yet

see an automatic turnaround, such as has occurred in the industrialized

  the City of
world)/Mexico would grow to 35,...40,...50 billion? If the human and

physical constraints are underplayed and only the socio-economic processes

·are modelled as though in a vacuum, the process would continue explosively. But

we would not have the case of the lily-pond where the water-lily population

doubles at given intervals, so that one day the pond is only half full of

lilies but the next critical day it is entirely choked. Human systems

break down much before they fill up all available space. They are reaching

that point of critical instability already, and we shall not have to wait

for the year 2000 to see what would happen thereafter.

Thus the conclusions drawn by Dwyer and endorsed by O'Connor are valid but

weak: Third World cities do not behave in general like First World (or

Second World) cities--for well-understood reasons--but their process of

population concentration is not likely to continue for long into the future.

The point of breakdown will intervene, in some cases within the next decade

or so. The suggested solutions are hardly spelled out by Dwyer (who contents

himself with speaking of possibilities of 'alternatives' to the one-way

adaptation of migrants to an absorptive urban culture that was characteristic

of an earlier phase of urbanisation in the First World), while they are

explicit but entirely utopian by O'Connor. (He does point out that, apart

from the first few of his ten conclusions, they are subjective judgments

which may well be challenged.) Beginning with factual statement applicable
to tropical Africa's cities (showing that they are growing at or above the
national average with little deconcentration, that the economic base for
them is very limited in Africa's stagnant economies,   that this growth
is creating intense problems of urban management, housing, water, sewage,
etc., and that employment opportunities fail to keep pace), he goes on
to affirm that continuing migration from the rural areas to the cities is
a rational response to the higher level of material well-being in the
latter (one wonders whether any level lower than that of squatter colonies
and various forms of urban slums can exist in the countryside--this must truly
be a 'subjective judgment') and points to the advantages of several smaller
cities vis-à-vis one giant metropolis. The advantages are not to be doubted,
already because of the plain fact that giant metropoli in the Third World
are nearing points of breakdown: consequently anything livable is preferable
to them. It is rather utopian, then, to ask that "efforts should be made
to ensure that the inevitable urban growth of future decades is less
concentrated in both time and space than in the past twenty years.../that/
it should then be less traumatic than the current experience of Lagos and
Kinshasa, and more beneficial in national terms." As O'Connor himself
points out, these efforts would require in most countries a substantial
shift in resource allocation away from the metropolis, despite the needs of
the metropolis and the many political pressures opposing any such shift.
The O'Connor scenario, in which the distinction between urban (or metropoli-
tan) and rural areas is no sharper than necessary (one wonders just what is
'necessary' in a given case), and deliberate efforts are made to ensure
that some aspects of urbanisation as a social process extend also into the
countryside, with many people, many families continuing to span the
divide (between urban and rural) seeking the 'best of both worlds'...all
this is day-dreaming, as O'Connor, himself an expert on African urban
conditions, should well know. Faced with cities such as Lagos, Kinshasa
and Addis Ababa, and with the economic, financial and social conditions
of these and other African countries, one should not ask, with any sense

of realism, that they leapfrog the processes of urban concentration which
have prevailed in Europe and North America and make use of the
latest communication technologies to create the kind of 'invisible cities'
of which Lewis Mumford dreamed and which remain a dream even in the United
States, Western Europe and Japan, except for particular subregions (such as
California, for example). This scenario, of using communications/in place
technologies
of continued population concentration, depends not only on continuing
mobility on the part of millions of people, and mobility and flexibility on
the part of private and public-sector decision-makers--it depends on an
entire culture-shift, on the absorption and adaptation of a post-industrial
kind of civilization which is difficult even for the average American and
European. Thus/one can agree wholeheartedly with O'Connor's conclusion,
while
that "the aim for most African /and, incidentally, other Third World/ countries
must be a metropolis modest in size, closely integrated both with a system
of dispersed smaller urban centres and with the people who remain in the
countryside, and /be/ culturally distinctive", one can hardly accept that
O'Connor is realistic when he admonishes decision-makers that they should
urgently seek such a goal"while there is yet time." It is precisely time
that is lacking from the equation, even if political will, another highly
dubious variable, is granted.

What, then, is the likely outcome? The crystal ball of urban futures is
admittedly cloudy. But it does contain two great factors, or points of
reference: continued population concentration in the Third World, and outer
limits to urban growth. When we add the inability of present-day governments
to face the situation, much less to do anything truly decisive about it,
we get a linear progression toward breakdown. Decentralization (as Sumet
Jumsai points out, in another paper for this Committee) begins with the
decentralization of the nation's power base. Such decentralization is not
occurring anywhere with anything like the required speed in order to stave
off the collision of population concentration with urban limits. Perhaps
a first collision its`elf harbors the opportunity for change. As the ancient

Chinese well realized--and as contemporary nonequilibrium thermodynamics and
paleontological evolution theory rediscovers--crisis and opportunity are
one and the same:/transformation emerges in the wake of system breakdown.
                        system
If this is a meager shaft of hope to hold out for the cities of the
developing world, I would ask others to find a more encouraging one.
Belief in an indefinite splitting of jobs, or in the ability to use
the latest communication technologies to create networks of small urban
centers where the distinction between 'urban' and 'rural' becomes hazy,
is not a foundation for hope; it is merely utopia. Utopias have their
place, but they should be embedded in the context of reality, as ideals to
aim for, and not suffer too much/academic theorizing. Of course, the data
                         from
supplied in these papers is fascinating and useful, and the concepts
reviewed are important. This Committee needs now to focus on finding
the real-world framework in which they can be put to use, as pointers
for a future that must soon become less cloudy if it is to be livable.

    Johnson-Marshall gave us the perspective, when he said that we can now
"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." He is also correct in saying
that we need to start with the basic needs of the human being, and then
proceed to the family, to the community, and society as a whole. True,
but how? Decision-makers will not proceed in this way, whether they are
in business or in politics. Academics have no power to implement their
ideas. Perhaps we shall have to wait until this 'brainless giant', which
is now both uncontrollable and unnecessary, begins to crack under the impact
of its own processes of system overload. Then, and probably only then,
will the metropolis of the future be born, like the Phoenix, on the ashes
of its predecessor. Perhaps the best we can do in the meanwhile is to
supply the key concepts for the rebirth, and to ensure that the flames that
consume the metropolis in process of uncontrolled population concentration
does not consume the concentrated population itself.