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## The Urban Imagination Towards the Eco-city

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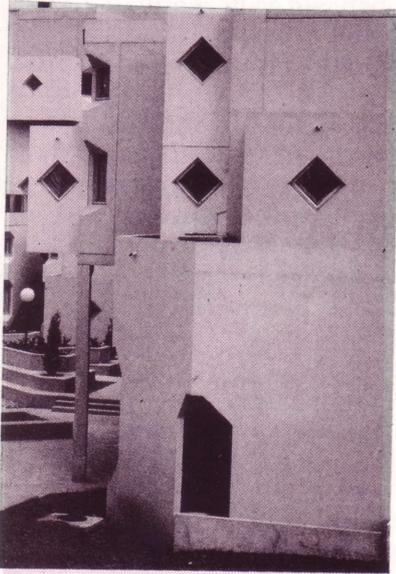
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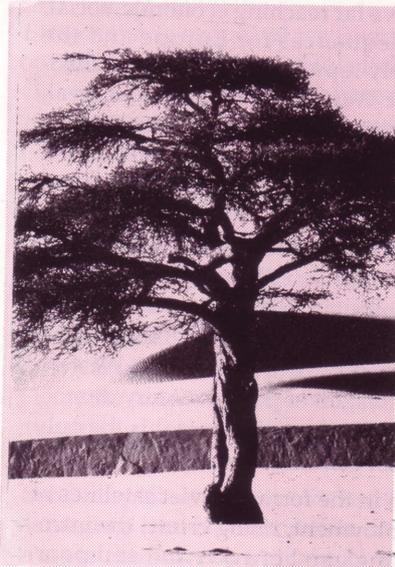
## The Urban Imagination

by Sohail Inayatullah



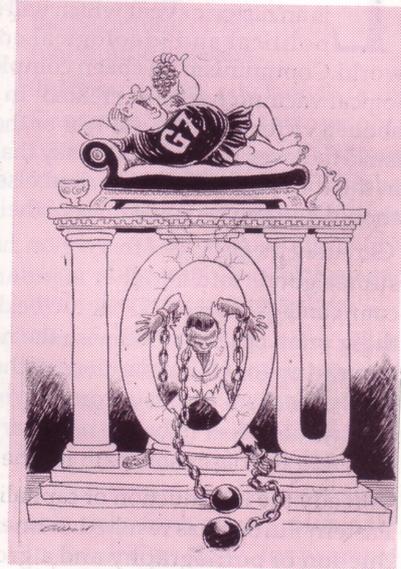
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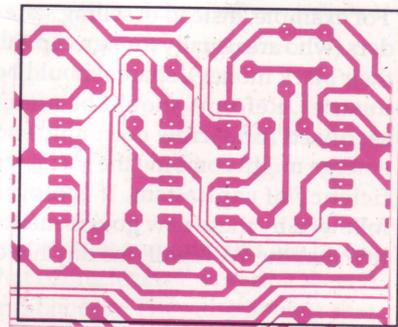
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# The Urban Imagination: Towards the Eco-City

by Sohail Inayatullah

The city is constructed in numerous ways. In the modern view, a city is defined by its civic culture; urban planners focus on the architecture and infrastructure of a city. Others believe the city must have an economic exchange system and a system of exchange and governance in order to be called a city. Modern American cities are largely defined by energy systems and by consumption systems; the car and the shopping mall.

From the geographical view, cities emerge as the number of individuals on a given territory increase. They must find ways to negotiate food, power, wealth, impersonal and personal relationships. How the city comes to be organized is based on these negotiations. Moreover, cities reflect and are constituted by the cultures that create them. For example, American culture defines cities as places one travels to for work or pleasure even though one may not be living there. American cities also exhibit expansion and decline unlike Asian cities which continue to expand and European cities which because of high energy costs have found ways to retain the old ancient city and new development.

American cities have emerged as part of America's colonization of the frontier while Asian cities have historically been the foci of polity, economy and culture. In recent US history, the construction of the city has gone through several stages, from the City Beautiful (designed around large government buildings) to the city efficient (concerned with sewerage systems, water and other basic needs)

to the city radical (the city and its basic human consequences).

Another way to understand the city is to compare it to its opposite, the rural. Historically, the city is the centre and the rural is its periphery. The city consumes what the rural produces. History is the history of the city for that is what remains, that is what archaeologists find. History shows the grandness of past human efforts.

But this grandness is based on finding ways of appropriating the wealth of those that grow food and produce goods. This is done either through tributary coercive methods in military states, by ideological systems where power is concentrated in priests or through exchange systems such as in capitalism. In every case the city has existed because of the rural and because of the ability of those in cities to appropriate rural wealth.

## Postmodern Views

In the emerging postmodern view, it is not only important how the city appropriates wealth but also how it obfuscates its location in our technocratic discourses. In this view the city is not construed as a place that creates policy. Rather it is itself a policy, in itself a way of organizing the world, indeed of knowing the world. The city then is a space, a configuration of power, values and more important ways of constructing the world. However, most often we see the city as a fixed place that produces politics, (in places like city hall, ghettos), instead of a place that is politics. The city then is a practice; a

changing set of values, ways of organizing and structures that emerge and disappear. For us, this may be difficult to see for we rarely see the city, its boundaries are wholly present to us and thus un-analyzable. Only when we distance ourselves from the city can we see our categories, our city spaces. We can do this by tracing the history of cities; to see how a particular city developed in one way rather than another (because of geographical factors, sackings of invaders, because of local and regional economy or because of the religious culture).

We can also do this by examining the structure of a city; what functions does it serve? Honolulu for example, is divided into recreation spaces (beaches and parks), an industrial zone that produces wealth, shopping consumer zones, a range of residential zones divided by affordability or class, government or business areas, natural reserves and garbage areas. One's status within the political economy of wealth is determined by the location of one's house, (in the hills or on the beachfront). Alternatively, in a religious culture, the city is determined by its places of congregation: shrines, temples and mosques.

Again, in the emerging postmodern view of cities, the effort is not to show these categories as natural but to show how they emerged, to ask how the categories we use to talk about the city have changed. For example, in medieval society, the emerging mercantilists existed outside of the city. They were the traders. It was only later when



*The modern city is abstract: created by economic and media forces*

capital accumulation took centre stage that they moved inside the city. With the traders now inside, the military were moved outside of the city, as a kind of modern day wall. Historically, security and sovereignty too have changed. Once a city was defined by its wall, protecting against trade and ideas: the modern city no longer has these walls. Indeed the modern city is abstract: created by economic and media forces. By virtue of this abstraction the modern city has to search for an identity ("I love New York" buttons and marketing slogans like "The gateway between North and South America" and the "Crossroads of the Pacific") are attempts to regain community, a collective "we". However, the reality is that there is no such community. The trend across large cities irrespective of culture is the remedievalization of the city with community defined by security systems, with private security agencies guarding plush areas and other areas defined by the color of

the gangs that roam them. Security not abstract identity has become central in defining the city.

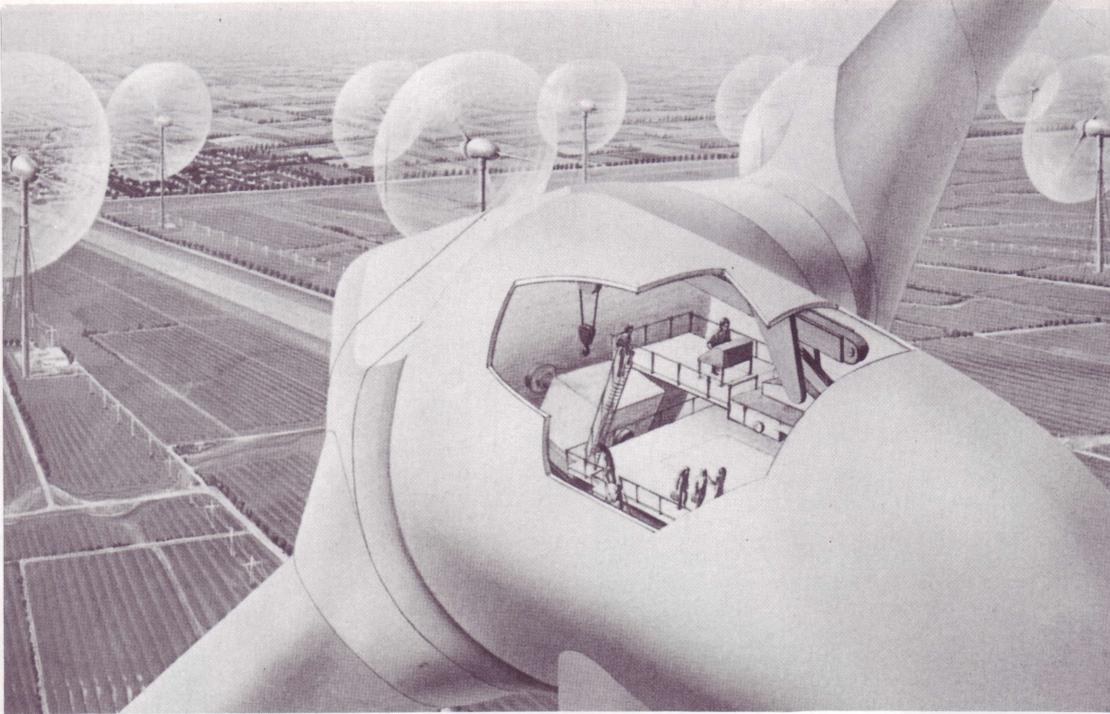
#### **Khaldun and Spengler: The Moral Discourse**

This is what the ancients predicted would happen with the city. For them, the way to understand the city was not by political, social or economic ways of seeing the world but by the moral discourse. For the Islamic philosopher Ibn Khaldun, there are two types of culture that are at near opposites; the nomadic and the urban. The first has the values of bravery, morality, strong kinship ties and respect for parental authority, while the other has cowardice, fragmentation, economic ties and individuality. But once a nomadic group gains power and wealth, once the size of the tribe increases then new relationships emerge; the values of the rural break down. Old loyalties disappear, there is fighting in the dynasty and with each new crisis

the legitimacy of the old governing group breaks down. The nomadic spirit that created the society disintegrates. The culture then declines and the invaders march in.

For Oswald Spengler, in the beginning there is culture but as cities become megalopolises culture degenerates into "civilization". Culture begins not with nomadic struggle but with the awakening of a great soul. As cities develop, power becomes concentrated into the hands of two classes, the nobility and the priests. Eventually however a capitalist class emerges and urban values replace agricultural ones. Money emerges victorious over traditional values and landed property.

In culture, democracy is controlled by the intellect, in the megalopolis, in civilization, it is money that buys votes. It is the money spirit that forces the civilization to expand, for cities to become bigger cities. Eventually the mass develops. At this stage, Spengler, who followed



the classic model of birth, adolescence, adulthood, senility and death, concluded that death is but near, the culture has lost its conviviality, creativity, and its spirituality. Instead of folk, there is only the mob. Power now becomes concentrated in rude force, the city is in its final days. Only a few can remember the brilliance of the past.

William Irwin Thompson finds these two visions of space as part of an unchanging historical pattern. "When one believes in an alternative vision of history...he is stepping outside the city to see a pastoral vision in which the office building and the universities do not obscure the archaic stars... Those left behind in the city define themselves as responsible and sane and see the wanderer as a madman. The wanderer defines himself as the only sane person in a city of the insane and walks out in search of other possibilities. All history seems to pulse in this rhythm of urban view and pastoral visions." (Thompson, 152-153, 1971)

If these visions of the city appear obvious to us now, it is because they have infiltrated our gazes,

making them folk wisdom. Moreover, they capture traditional dichotomies. They also point to the structural difficulties in creating alternative futures for the city. While green activists and efforts by Richard Register in "Ecocity: Berkeley" argue for creative cities where the communal and the spiritual are possible in a properly designed city, Leopold Kohr, taking the structural view, reminds us that it is size that engenders the problems of urbanization. Others such as Mark Satin, speaking for the American counter-cultural movement, have based their entire theory of New Age Politics on this variable, arguing against the "big city outlook" (patriarchy, centralization, bureaucratization, corporatization.)

### **The Spiritual/Ecological City**

In the ecological vision, the city is designed for low energy use, the car is made problematic as it damages the environment. In addition, size and distance are critical. Ivan Illich, for example, has argued that after a certain velocity in transportation systems, social justice and equity decrease. Eco-cities are thus

designed to create possibilities for closeness, wherein the group (kin or work) is the prime unit of identification.

In terms of recent exemplary designs, there is Ananda Nagar. This city in rural India was designed by P.R. Sarkar. Situated on an ancient sacred site where individuals attained enlightenment, Ananda Nagar is an ecological city intended to regenerate the rural economy. As in other intentional communities it will be a self-sufficient with its own education, soft energy and economic wealth creation projects. It also has sanctuaries for animals and rare plants. Instead of huge dams there are small dams and an extensive pond system designed to restore the environment. Streets are named after scientists and philosophers: Einstein, Gandhi, Tagore and Shakespeare to mention a few. This is an example of a city that is culture: it represents spiritual culture. It is different from cities developed by other social movements in that it is meant to revitalize an impoverished area by creating self-reliance and self-sufficiency, solving the problems of

water and poverty as opposed to finding a home for a monoculture of those with a similar world-view (although the city is a monument to its founder, P.R. Sarkar). Moreover, this city is connected to history even as it creates an alternative vision of the future for India and other peripheralized places.

Central to this rethinking of the city is the restitution of land. Historically Indian villages were ecologically sound, as the local village government controlled the environment. When this responsibility was transferred to the British, to centralized government, the bureaucracy developed centralized rules to control the common areas taking away power from the community and granting it to those far away. The example of Ananda Nagar is among the strategies to recover the rural and to develop useful forms of community management, whether it be for Detroit, Amsterdam or Calcutta.

**Global and Local City Spaces**

While efforts to create new cities built on history and based on community self-reliance are laudable, the city still exists in a larger political economy. When localized, capitalism might be protected against, but the juggernaut of modernity is difficult to vanquish until the city itself becomes an alternative policy and becomes part of a larger civilization. This is the classic tension between

globalness and localness. Cities show this tension and have the possibility of creating a new space wherein they are locally managed with a context of global design. But we should not forget that this was Pol Pot's brutal design as well. The history of creating intentional cities as a response to modernity or as an attempt to transcend modernity are ripe with failures as well. Planning and design, while necessary, often place the "city" in the policy arena of technocracy, not in the hands of culture or spiritual consciousness.

Finally, even as part of ourselves might wish for cities like Islamabad, we realize that such cities are only possible with the removal of certain classes. For one cannot escape history, and one cannot escape those who the city displaces, namely, the other classes and, more importantly, the spiritual and ethical discourse that the city attempts to remove from our creations and understandings of the world. While we all want the City Efficient, we are forced through the social and economic consequences of city design to remember the City Ecological and the City Spiritual. The city might attempt to wall out what the dominant culture fears, but in its creation of physical and intellectual security, it robs itself of the Other--an Other that eventually finds some way of re-entering the minds of those in the city, often

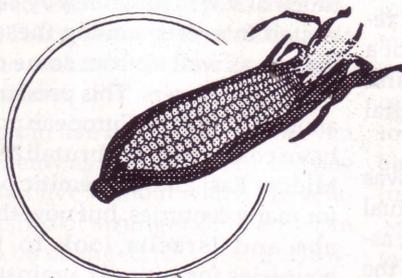
through various forms of cultural resistance. In contrast, community-managed and ecologically sound cities are faced with the larger forces of modern capitalism and with the lure of city lights.

Cities are representations of various theories (theories of modernity) and they themselves are the creators of theories. Cities do not create culture or public policy, rather they are culture and policy. City spaces are but the concrete manifestations of our paradigms or our imaginations of the real.

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