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Values for sustainability in city design

& A gentle declaration

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Preamble to a Manifesto

The declaration which is the intended end of this paper is about city-making. It is grounded in the discursive context of civic environmentalism. Within that context, it considers the idea of city-making as a project of (1) remaking the environment as a desirable setting, (2) participating in the more cosmopolitan idea of environment as constituted not just of natural areas, but a co-dependent system of the natural and the human-made and (3) tapping the source of a true environmental ethic, a goal accomplished by releasing the power of abstracted values about environment. The lessons are instructive in order for our human communities to advance the cause of creating sustainable environments.

Civic Environmentalism

Shutkin (2000) wrote that civic environmentalism is a kind of environmental activism that is about "building democratic communities and healthy economies and about protecting the physical places and resources that sustain them" (pg. x). Civic environmentalism teaches practitioners to see nature and culture as intertwined. It is grounded within a philosophy of holistic practice, one that considers community health, ecosystem health, social health, economic health, present conditions and future conditions, all as interdependent.

While there are several components within the concept of civic environmentalism, this paper will limit itself to the dimension of the physical places that sustain the very practice of environmentalism and, within that delimited realm, the city will be interrogated as a physical setting that should be treated as a place of value. As Shutkin pointed out, the settings that people inhabit are not only affected by people. The former, in turn, influence people's sense of place, community and well-being. Thus, community health, he added, cannot be divorced from environmental quality.



Idea of Abstracted Value

Smith (2003) attempted to develop intellectual foundations that might serve to support an ethic of civic environmentalism. The way to proceed, he proposed, is to first identify life goods that civic environmentalism intuits and, second, abstract, from those life goods the constitutive goods that lend moral force to the former. It is possible to do that because both types of good coexist. To understand the ideas of life good and constitutive good, imagine the following.

Goods that humans experience may be resolved into two categories:

1. Purposed goods: They are specific manifest goals achieved through purposeful, directed activity. For civic environmentalists, examples might be cleaner or more attractive local environments. These may be termed, life goods.
2. Unpurposed goods: They are accompanying goods that emerge during pursuit of purposed goods. For example, *fellowship* and *experience of community* might be derived from collective civic environmental action. They may be termed, constitutive goods.

A constitutive good, then, is an abstracted value which enriches or elaborates a life good. It is a latent good, an interpreted good that one “reasons out” of a more explicit life good.

Constitutive goods can, in the end, be powerful tools as they are rich arguments that aid the maturation of civic environmentalism. Life goods that we need exist already. Within the practice of civic environmentalism and city making, we must work to magnify constitutive goods that accompany them.

City as Site for Beginning of Environmental Consciousness/Action

Light (2003) observed that cities can be described using different themes:

1. as physical environments,
2. as manifestations of intentions and
3. as historically-dynamic places with a past and an orientation to a future.

Light also offered a vision of the city as continuous with other environments rather than separated from them. All the above are relevant to the current discussion and they present the city as worthy of the attention of any environmentalist. The foregoing also provide a framework within which the essence of the current discourse is grounded.

Traditional Concerns About the City

There is an anti-urban ethos among some planners (de Shalit, 2003). In the city, they see corruption, murder, exploitation and so on. They infer that such evils are built into city life and symbolize, in general, what cities are about. Urban life, they conclude, is morally inferior. Some anti-urban claims are discussed below (from de Shalit, 2003; Light, 2003; Shutkin, 2000).



Alienation.

1. The city alienates because life is rushed. For instance, people drive, take a train or walk hurriedly. Those who walk leisurely are bumped. Moving about in a hurried manner precipitates *detachment*--from the physical and social contexts.
2. The city alienates because the human-built context *intimidates*. Buildings tower above people. Huge buildings denote power and domination. They are impersonal and dehumanizing; they manifest the sublime. Intimidated, people feel alienated.

Commercialization.

1. The city is a place for commerce. Commercial districts in cities are also alienating. They are primarily defined by their function of commerce and not, for instance, by human relations or a sense of meaningful history.
2. Commercialization dis-privileges the fundamental or intrinsic value of things and concentrates on their worth in terms of economic value. For instance, in buying a city house, the idea of future property value sometimes overtakes the idea of building a "home." That value sometimes transfers to attitude in dealing with other people: people become means to ends.

Individualism.

1. The city is fragmented in terms of social relations. People in a hurry do not take time to know one another. Also, overwhelming density conditions people to become impersonal. If, however, people cannot get to know one another "intimately," it is difficult to cooperate as a community.
2. The urban spirit tends to be open, ready to accept a wide range of things. While that can be a benefit, it also carries the risk of making the spirit neutral in terms of commitment. Thus, there is erosion of the kind of common goal that can unite people.
3. Often, city layout itself reinforces an attitude of neutrality. Endless avenues take people to no conclusive ends, each to no place in particular.

Injustice.

1. In the city, people become accustomed to distressing social conditions--such as poverty and homelessness--and become indifferent to those ills. Desensitization silences the voice of social justice.
2. Life in the city is hectic. It is impractical or hard to pause and worry about everything. Consequently, indifference becomes increasingly pervasive. Social-institutional and mere day-to-day demands of urban life condition the human spirit to accept living with injustice.

Fragmentation.

1. Within the city, good and bad experiences are segregated into different places, such as suburbs and slums. Such segregation "saps the vitality of places" (Shutkin, 2000, p. 48).
2. Environmental conditions make it difficult for people to come together by creating "dangerous and frightening physical barriers--e.g. brownfield sites, high-speed roadways splitting communities" (Shutkin, 2000,



p. 76). Deterioration in environmental conditions that normally afford bringing local groups together forestalls cultivation of social capital that is necessary for collective environmental action.

Ecological footprint.

1. Urban density is bad because of the large ecological footprint of the city. (An ecological footprint is "an indication of the full ecological burden of a city on the environment in terms of the resources required from surrounding land to sustain the city's urban population" [after Rees in Light, 2003]).

Counter-Arguments to View of City as Inherently Evil

The anti-urban world-view, which casts the city as inevitably evil, has its challengers. For instance, de Shalit (2003) offered the following arguments:

1. One instance of a phenomenon does not characterize all instances. Every city does not manifest the ills observed in one particular city. Hence, any mark observed in any particular city is not necessarily present in every city.
2. Besides, observation of certain ills in a city does not necessarily imply that the city is, when everything about it is added, largely evil.
3. That ills are perceived does not mean that they constitute a necessary or an inseparable dimension of cities. So, perceived ills are not inherently tied to the character or definition of a city.
4. Some of the ills of the city are the result of the attitudes we hold towards the city--for instance, as a place of economic sustenance rather than one of cultivation of a sense of home. That influences how we manage the city. Jane Jacobs (1961) blamed ills on our incompetence in city planning.
5. Ultimately, argued de-Shalit (2003), the city is not the cause of injustice. Political and institutional arrangements are.
6. Light (2003) offered an argument in favor of the city. Densely populated human communities are inherently more environmentally sustainable than non-densely populated human communities, all other things being equal. A rural setting where people engage in unsustainable practices is no better than the city; indeed, a rural setting with unsustainable consumption practices equivalent to a city's is worse than the city. It is suburbanization and flight to the countryside that we should fear. These movements of thousands are a disaster for both rural and wild landscape. What we need to do is work with the structural systems we already have in place--i.e. work with cities and predicted urbanization trends. Environmentalists should focus on defending and promoting urban density as a component of sustainability.
7. Light (2003) returned to the idea of ecological footprint and revealed an important dimension of interpretation embedded within it. An ecological footprint gives us not simply a representation of the impact of cities on the environment, but that impact as a function of the average consumption practices of a concentrated population. Thus, the information revealed by "ecological footprint" is really unsustainable consumption patterns of people in certain industrialized settings. Light then noted that ecological footprint analysis is a critique of unsustainable populations rather than a critique of cities themselves.



Abstracted Values for City-Making

If the city is not inherently evil, it is possible to derive some constitutive goods from it. Some of these that may be abstracted are as follows:

1. Intentionality as practice (idea of the *good* in urban conservation): Instead of focussing attention on the problems of the urban environment, we ought to direct our attention at the "*goods*" that we desire from the urban setting and give them agency through practices such as urban conservation. The aim of urban conservation is not simply to conserve objects such as monuments, houses, streets, parks or even ecosystems, but to conserve ideas of the good, which are about intentions behind the city and its parts, its past use (history), current use and future value (de Shalit, 2003).
2. Personalization through uniqueness: Character of a city can be *thin*. That means it possesses universal characteristics as can be found in other cities (e.g. laid out for efficient transportation). *Thickness*, on the other hand, refers to a character embedded in recognition of the unique story of the city (de Shalit, 2003).
3. Meaning through memory: According to urban historian, Dolores Hayden, urban landscapes are storehouses for social memories (in Shutkin, 2000). Memory provides meaning for inhabitants of the city. Architectural theorist, Aldo Rossi (1966), evaluated the city in terms of collective memory. Italo Calvino (1972) illustrated the power of imagery of the city in terms of memory.
4. Sense of community: Light (2003) argued that humans are essential to the being of cities. Therefore, an urban environmentalism needs to emphasize human values such as creating human bonds embedded in a sense of community. Smith (2003) noted that a normative foundation of civic environmentalism is community--not as people, but as the spirit of living collectively.
5. Sense of place: A place, observed environmental philosopher, Mark Sagoff, is "a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feelings" (in Shutkin, 2000, p. 140). Part of what makes citizenship possible, wrote Lewis Mumford, is the idea of place (in Shutkin, 2000). Place itself contributes to the sense of community. In order to do that, wrote Smith (2003), the *power of place as moral source must be released*. One way in which that can be accomplished is by designing neighborhoods to have distinctive identities. That kind of place will tend to have intimate meaning attached to it, will be desirable and, hopefully, will be chosen by people. The power of space as a moral source is released when people engage in that form of existential choice-making.

Statements of a Gentle Declaration

1. Cities have a social dimension: they are historically-dynamic physical environments (Light, 2003) that manifest intentions and contain past memories, present use and future possibilities. Each city has a story that invests it with particular meaning for its inhabitants.
2. Cities also have an ecological dimension: they are not isolated settings within the physical environment, but are substantially intertwined with the natural world.
3. Designers and planners of cities must recognize the interdependence of these two dimensions of the city. They must realize that the health of the social city cannot be divorced from the health of the physical-ecological city. Recognition of the continuity between city, nature and human will engender values that contribute to designing cities as sustainable environments.



4. The designer of the city can abstract greater constitutive goods from the idea of the city and these goods can serve as guides for the designer in creating environments whose users, in their act of living, can also recognize and contribute to socio-ecological sustainability.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion explored the idea of the city within a framework of civic environmental action and proposed values for making and re-making the city in a way consistent with promoting physically and socially-sustainable environments. The trajectory of the discussion may be summarized as follows:

1. The city must be seen as a part of a whole environment.
2. The city must continuously be re-constituted and re-made in a way that it becomes respected and loved. Tools and strategies include history and memory, recognition of interdependence between city and nature, a sense of community and, finally, a sense of place.
3. The worth of cultivating that sense of place is that it strengthens the foundation and perpetuates an attitude of responsibility towards the whole environment.

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