

A Green Masterplan Is Still a Masterplan

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In the last ten years, we have seen the first generation of greened masterplans. But while planning and even zoning – generally speaking – are certainly important, the masterplan culture needs to be challenged. It developed in the 1960s, when, with the failures of cities looming over history, urban leaders wanted a way to restore confidence in the downtowns and to create a positive sense of destiny and purpose. Originally, the masterplan was the basis upon which the zoning ordinance and site usage regulations were defined and enforced, but then in the 1980s the reach of the masterplan expanded to include questions of tourism and culture. City centers were no longer to be torn down arbitrarily, but were to be preserved as civic environments. In that sense, the ideals of the Modernist city came to be fused with the remnants of the so-called traditional city. Holding all this together was the image of a city that was not too new and not too old, an image based on a modern notion of block ownership in combination with a rationally-controlled sentimentality.

Masterplans, however, have always promised more than they could deliver. Even today most preserve the notion of static square blocks and of individual buildings. Most envision the urban core as a tourist and convention center destination surrounded by residential suburbs. Most are accessed by highways. And one always finds the usual assortment of parks, streams, so-called *green corridors*, and *green buildings*, and where possible, preservation districts to house the elite and serve as tourist magnets. The basic premise of a financial, urban core and outlying suburbia is almost never challenged. All this is particularly well suited to the developed countries where there are no millions of people filling vast slums and where new cities are a thing of the remote past.

The masterplan has exhausted itself. It was a transition from the post-WWII era that helped cities survive in an age of urban doubt. But now, cities are thriving, and more and more people are living there, so what we need is not a new and improved masterplan, but a possibly new understanding of the city, and in particular of a city

stripped of sentimental associations that are always embedded in the masterplan.¹ An eco-city should speak to the eco-revolution.

A book like *Sustainable Architecture and Urbanism*, edited by Dominique Gauzin-Müller, for example, reveals many of the problems associated with current-day eco-urbanism. The developments that are taking root in Germany, France, and elsewhere are certainly steps in the right direction: green roofs, landscaping, waste control, heritage maintenance, energy, education, and planning. But in the end, the book represents nothing more than an uncritical celebration of the greening of the European masterplan; this pragmatist compulsion of cautious improvements, as tactically important as they may be, seems now to consume so much of our energy that more utopian ambitions have been pushed to the side or limited to a few prestige buildings. If Green becomes the new norm, it becomes little more than the new version of the same bureaucracies that got us into trouble in the first place. We have become so used to the masterplan that we assume that this is the only way that a city can be represented and built.

My criticism also holds true for many of the roughly 50 projects featured in the book *Eco-Urbanism*.² The projects range from the serious-minded *Subic Bay Philippines Project* (Koetter, Kim and Associates) with its Euro-centric gravitas, to the Eco-cuteness of *Ecolonia* (Atelier Lucien Kroll) and the *Halifax EcoCity Project* in Australia (Paul Francis Downtown). Somewhere in-between is the eco-mall urbanism of the *Glendale Town Center*, California (Elizabeth Moule and Stephanos Polyzoides). Why *Kirchsteigfeld*, Germany (Rob Krier/Christoph Kohl), with its *retro* neo-19th-century urban blocks, is in the book is a mystery except that it, perhaps, proves that the ponderous urbanism of the 19th century can, in fact, and is still a viable urban model since it too can now be done in an appropriately *green* way.³ All except three are in the modernized west and none are in the undeveloped world.⁴

A critical discussion of these projects – outlining their successes and failures, their political agendas and theoretical subtexts – is, however, nowhere to be found.

Are we then no longer able to envision cities built on different models than the ones we live in? Think back to the early modern hopes for linear cities, path cities, and radiant cities of Chandigarh, Islamabad, Brazilia, and Canberra. Urban design, going strong even into the 1970s, was, however, deflated by the rise of urban planning and, in a sense by architecture itself, which became so uninterested in urban design that most urban design programs died or stumbled ahead with minimal funding. I cannot recall a single meeting in that institution in which I teach, in which the architects have met with the urban planners down the hall to discuss their common interests and concerns; this is a common breach in academia. I do not mean that we need to fantasize about some wonderful – and probably bizarre – alternative, but that we need to break out of the mold that urban planning has imposed on our urban imagination in the last forty years. The cumulative result has been a complete erasure – from the

¹ In *Sustainable Architecture and Urbanism* we read that “the principles of sustainable development encompass an appreciation of social and cultural roots,” which lead the “protection of characteristic residential districts” [Dominique Gauzin-Müller, *Sustainable Architecture and Urbanism* (Bern: Birkhäuser, 2002) p. 87]. This means that it is impossible to shape a city in the context of the eco-revolution, unless these historic districts are recognized as part of museo-urbanism suitable, for attracting boutiques, restaurants and residences for the elite.

² Miguel Ruano, *Eco-Urbanism, Sustainable Human Settlements, 60 Case Studies* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1998).

³ There are several projects that seem to defy the purpose of the book, like *Landsberger Allee* in Berlin (Daniel Libeskind) and the revitalization of Savona Italy (Valerio Saggini&Stefania Belloni). What they have to do with eco-urbanism escapes me.

⁴ Most of the projects, as Richard Ingersoll has already noted, are, in fact, not urban, but suburban developments. Richard Ingersoll, “Building Nature’s Ruin?,” in *Harvard Design Magazine* 18 (Spring/Summer 2003), p. 4.