

[Restricted Access] or The *Open City*?

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During a conference in Beijing in October 2006, environmental politics expert Klaus Töpfer made a memorable statement: “The battle for a sustainable society is won or lost in the city.” As the moment draws near when two thirds of the world population live in cities or at least in an urbanized environment, it is clear how urgent this statement has become.

The city is our center of culture, science, politics, and trade. Various recent studies by social scientists have made it clear that cities are the breeding grounds of economic growth and innovation. Apparently, density attracts density and leads to intensive interaction. Intensive interaction, in turn, leads to innovative activities. Henri Lefebvre once described how the interaction between various social networks leads to the emergence of new networks. In *Delirious New York*, Rem Koolhaas writes about the *Culture of Congestion* and the *City of the Captive Globe*, which consists of a compression of extreme expressions of culture and life styles; in his book *Creative Cities*, Richard Florida identifies the three T’s (Technology, Talent, and Tolerance) as the most important factors for the emergence of creative industries. All this indicates that the high-density city is not just a

transitional phase in the development of human settlements that would eventually be replaced by a state of Arcadia, as Frank Lloyd Wright hoped for in his book *The Living City* and visualized in his utopian project *Broadacre City*.¹ The high-density city must be regarded, now more than ever, as an inevitable and constituting form of organization of life on earth.

At the same time, the city also is the stage upon which extreme energy consumption, pollution, social abuse, and social conflicts have emerged. In Beijing, for instance, the air quality sometimes has become so bad that even radical measures like the strict limitation of private car use has had only negligible effects. The enormous water consumption has lowered the groundwater level to such an extent that the entire region now suffers from water shortage and draughts, not to mention impending geological problems. In Lagos and other tropical mega-cities, the shortage of clean water and appropriate sewage systems and the ubiquitous open garbage dumps have led to serious threats to the public health and to an almost irreversible pollution of the soil. In São Paulo and Johannesburg, excessive differences in income and prosperity between social groups has resulted in cities that consist of archipelagos of gated islands where the crime rate is sky high. Los Angeles is all but paralyzed by its enormous suburban expansion combined with the lack of adequate public transportation.

¹ *Broadacre City* was the antithesis of a city and the apotheosis of the newly born suburbia, shaped through Wright’s particular vision. It was both a planning statement and a socio-political scheme by which each U.S. family would be given a one acre (4,000 m²) plot of land from the federal lands reserves, and a Wright-conceived community would be built anew from this. In a sense it was the exact opposite of transit-oriented development. There is a train station

“The city is in debt to the surrounding country,” says Töpfer. “It uses her natural resources and the products of its cheap labor, and, in return, gives back waste, erosion, and crime.” Of course, this is a bit rhetorical: as part of the urbanized landscape, city and country are complementary and inseparably bound to one another in an ever more complex relation. In *Edge City*, Joel Garreau points out that polycentric agglomerations form productive organisms where local centers and peripheral developments function complementary to each other (i.e., city dwellers go to the countryside for recreation, and suburban dwellers go to the city to shop), and Saskia Sassen, in her book *Global City*, stresses the co-dependency of urban agglomerations and their global economy environments.

As far as the use of resources is concerned, we are now faced with a paradox: the so-called developed world has arrived at a so-called sustainable urban culture and a humane standard of comfort. However, despite widely-applied sustainable technology, the growth of wealth has led to a steady increase of energy-use, hence an increase in the waste and carbon dioxide emissions. And although the trend is digressive, a turning point, a significant reduction of pollution, is nowhere in sight. On the other hand, the so-called developing world lives in a so-called unsustainable way – i.e., living without sewer systems, the proliferation of refuse dumps, and the burning of wood, etc. But on the whole, the developing world uses only a fraction of the

energy produced, and the pollution generated per person is in no way comparable.

Most people in the First World find it difficult to re-adjust their consumer lifestyle with an eye towards environmental responsibility, whereas most people in the Third World want to live like people in the First. The First World’s concerns about the ecology of the Third World have been interpreted as hypocritical and moralistic. This may partly be true, but, of course, one of the motives of this concern is the question whether the developing nations may skip a few stages in the evolution towards a more sustainable condition.

Development rests on cumulative acquisition and management of knowledge, which results in economic growth and technological innovation. Apparently, we have to go through an evolution of trial and error, of consumption and squandering before we can sublimate our life into sustainability. The efficiency and the effectiveness of the combustion motor has more than doubled since its invention. The Internet has become an indispensable global communication instrument with unprecedented positive effects. We owe it to the American army, which developed it in order to have an anti-hierarchic communication network that would remain operational even if great parts of it were destroyed by enemy attacks.

The notion of *trial and error* has led some people to believe that innovation can only prosper under non-compulsory conditions. This has been

and a few office and apartment buildings in *Broadacre City*, but the apartment dwellers are expected to be a small minority. All important transportation is done by automobile and the pedestrian can exist safely only within the confines of the one acre (4,000 m²) plots where most of the population dwells.