

THE URBAN SUSTAINABILITY QUESTION

New Zealand cities, culture and planning: keynote address to NZPI 1992 Annual Conference.

The idea and practice of sustainability relates obviously to concerns with energy conservation, decisions about offshore drilling, various forms of exploitation of the natural environment, use of fossil fuels, nuclear power plants, solar and wind technologies, highway versus public transportation budgets, protection of the biosphere, and so forth. These are complex and varied topics which makes sustainability a difficult notion to grasp. In all of this, however, it is not very clear how, or if, cities as a way of life fit into the picture.

Of all the cultural artifacts civilisation has evolved, cities are amongst the most wasteful consumers of resources. One of our favourite scapegoats, the Americans, should rightly feel guilty for the statistic that has been often cited during the last 20 years: that 6% of the world's population consumes 35% of its resources. Unfortunately, individual sentiments of guilt have done little to alter collective accountability.

The ozone holes above Antarctica, the progress of global warming, acid rain, and soil and water depletion, have become acceptable compensations for a high entropy way of life.

New Zealand certainly shouldn't sit smugly in judgment of the US or of anywhere else. We are as involved and as implicated as the others. The three major contributors to the crisis: mechanised agriculture, unclean forms of industry, and rapid urbanisation, are well known, and the expansion of all three has been exponential since the end of World War II.

Urbanisation, which is the particular responsibility of planners, architects and designers, is arguably the most important of this deleterious triad and the most difficult to discipline, because it is less a technological or biological matter than an expressly social and cultural one.

Urban sustainability is centrally and most profoundly a social, political and cultural

question. As such, it is something which arises not out of necessity, but as an act of will. Urban sustainability cannot simply be legislated for, and then expected to happen; nor is it something which professionals do simply in the manner that one would design a car or plan a road.

While the Resource Management Act refers a great deal to aquifers, ecosystems and other such natural phenomena, it largely ignores what cities are, and the purpose they serve in society.

It is not clear from the act that urbanism as a way of life in New Zealand is at all important. As a consequence, the act provides us with few urban sustainability answers, but many questions.

The reasons are varied and many; yet it has been fundamental to the formation of civilisation itself and, in spite of contemporary mobility and communication, con-

BY CLARENCE T AASEN
PROFESSOR OF ARCHITECTURE
VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF
WELLINGTON

tinues to remain so today. Hence, one of the first principles of cities is that they are integrally related to place. The nature of the place of a city has obvious and widespread implications with respect to its sustainability.

Cities' cultural self-consciousness is fundamental to their essential nature and has implications in relation to sustainability. For example, numerous cities throughout history have been consciously and purposefully founded. Historically it was common that "the choice of the site, a serious matter on which the whole fate of the people depended . . . was always left to the decision of the gods".¹

Today our profession would like to feel that planners have a key role to play in selecting urban sites, using their unique rituals and powers, although less and less so with the expectation that they will be seen as a substitute for the gods!

History plays a key role in forming, understanding, and designing and planning cities.

Lewis Mumford states:

"Cities are products of time. They are the moulds in which men's lifetimes have cooled and congealed, giving lasting shape, by way of art, to moments that would otherwise vanish with the living and leave no means of renewal or wider participation behind them. In the city, time becomes visible: buildings and monuments and public ways, more open than the written record, more ▶

Below: Central Toronto, a resource-intensive infrastructure.



◀ *subject to the gaze of many men than the scattered artifacts of the countryside, leave an imprint upon the minds even of the ignorant or the indifferent. Through the material fact of preservation, time challenges time, time clashes with time: habits and values carry over beyond the living group, streaking with different strata of time the character of any single generation. Layer upon layer, past times preserve themselves in the city until life itself is finally threatened with suffocation: then, in sheer decadence, modern man invents the museum.*" 2

Cities, and the architecture which forms them, are often impressive formal and aesthetic phenomena. But they are not static phenomena: they are in a constant process of transformation. Even cities founded in accordance with a specific and rigid plan seldom adhere strictly to that plan. We know of no case where the builder of a city or town was able to foresee its total evolution, and plan in advance for the developments to come. Rather, over time cities undergo a process of change. To sustain a city means, therefore, to keep alive and nourish constantly changing and often unpredictable cultural phenomena.

All complex societies have in their cities modes of social organisation which are distinctively urban in their basic purpose, form and operation.

The first cosmopolitan (formed for trade and communication) city originated much earlier than Classical Roman times. Tablets from 2000 BC, discovered in the ancient city of Kanesh in Anatolia, record the commercial transactions of the community of Assyrian merchants who occupied a walled cantonment on the outskirts of the native



Above: Wellington's distinctive setting and particular historical and cultural character.

city. Operating effectively as a Chamber of Commerce, they controlled the mechanism of trade between Assyria and Anatolia. The colony, known as "karum", was one of seven or eight established in Anatolia, indicating that even 3000 years ago the institution of trade was well enough formed for a particular kind of city to be associated with it.

Cities reinforce the art of living in communities: strangers become neighbours, and villagers expand their social horizons. Extensive archaeological evidence indicates clearly that early cities, such as Babylon, contained migrant populations, often in substantial numbers, and commonly of varied ethnic groups. This variation was central to the economic, social and cultural life of the city. And it was structured into the particular form and character the city assumed.

As one author states:

"The city is the form and symbol of an integrated social relationship: it is the seat of the temple, the market, the hall of justice, the academy of learning. Here in the city the goods of civilisation are multiplied and manifolded; here is where human experience is transformed into viable signs, symbols, patterns of conduct, systems of order." 3

Understanding this "art of living in cities" is, I feel, an important aspect of understanding what urban sustainability is about.

The city can be interpreted as not only a physical and socio-economic reality, but also as a state of mind. To quote:

"Mind takes form in the city; and in turn, urban forms condition mind. The city is both a physical utility for collective living and a symbol of those collective purposes and unanimitities that arise under such favouring circumstances. With language itself, [the city] remains man's greatest work of art." 4

I feel that sustaining any city must mean also understanding and appreciating it as a state of mind and a "great work of art".

ASSUMPTIONS BUILT INTO THE RMA

In a sense, the idea of sustainability is a strange and even disturbing one when applied to cities. By definition, to sustain

a city means: to give support to it; to provide for its maintenance; to cause it to continue; to bear, hold, or prop it up; to carry or withstand its load and challenges; to prevent it from sinking or giving away; and to endure it. Other variations obviously could be applied as well. When you look at cities such as New York or London, or contemplate a continuous city in the form of a "megalopolis" stretching from the Great Lakes to Montreal to New York city, then one has to ask what it means to "hold up", "prop up", or "give support to" such phenomena — and how is this done?


Research of this century has clearly shown the limitations of applying naturalistic and ecological models as the primary basis for understanding cities. Yet, it seems to me that there is a naturalistic bias built into the Resource Management Act which will make it difficult to apply the concept of sustainability to New Zealand cities. My suspicion and fear is that this naturalistic orientation could, and most likely will, tend to preclude the question of our cities and other aspects of our constructed environment from the serious consideration which they deserve.

The implication in the act that cities can be sustained by giving or providing support, maintenance, sustenance etc, to them, implies that cities are not serendipitous phenomena, but rather that a kind of control over the direction and form which cities take is possible. Certainly if planners didn't believe this, and convincingly persuade their clients regarding the validity of this viewpoint, they would be very hungry indeed!

Yet, I am sure that the irony hasn't escaped many planners that we are here talking about sustaining cities in a town [Napier] that only 60 years ago was decimated by an earthquake. This points to the inherent fragility of the concept of urban sustainability, and reflects again on Rykwert's statement that the city is "an artifact of a curious kind, compounded of willed and random elements, imperfectly controlled." 5

Therefore, while perhaps true, I believe this assumption of control cannot, and should not be taken for granted by planners or by anyone else. It is sobering, for example, to remember that in the context of the total number of cities, historically between only 1-5% of all known cities have been planned; more than 95% simply grew in their serendipitous manner. And even if we accept that cities technically, economically and politically, can be controlled, we still must ask questions such as:

- controlled for what purpose?
- controlled for whose benefit?
- controlled by whom?
- controlled through which mechanisms?
- controlled at what costs?



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In contrast to the 150-year history of New Zealand cities, the Iraqi city of Erbil has been continuously occupied for approximately 8000 years. While this period of occupation is undoubtedly not the norm, we do know that numerous cities have been continuously occupied for two or more thousands of years; that others have been occupied for very long periods, then abandoned and later reoccupied; and that still others were occupied for similarly lengthy periods and then permanently abandoned, sometimes even totally destroyed.

We can conclude that cities can be created, they can be sustained, and they can be destroyed. In each case, however, with the exception of natural disasters, this is not determined by necessity, but by an act of cultural will.

Without delving too deeply into the intricacies of the differences between the planning and design versus the management of cities, I think we could agree that they are not the same in terms of either their philosophical, legal, or their professional implications.

To plan a city implies the mental formulation of a method to order or form a new or existing city. To design a city adds the idea of ordering or forming the individual parts of a city, usually suggesting specific patterns or layouts to achieve a degree of order or harmony. By definition, plan and design are methods of doing something, as well as ends, formulations or results. Through the processes of planning and designing we end up with understanding and interpretations of social needs and desires, with ideas for satisfying those needs and desires, and with concrete and specific forms for achieving these intentions.

By contrast managing a city is a process of bringing about or accomplishing things or events through contriving means or mechanisms for achieving those ends. Most commonly in our society, it refers to the efficient handling or controlling of cities, or of other phenomena.

The fact that "manage", not plan or design, is used as the central philosophical and operational mode in the RMA must, I believe, be accepted as quite intentional. And I feel that it should be of some concern to us, not only as professionals, but



Above: The 8000-year-old city of Erbil in Mesopotamia confirms both the cultural will to settle and urban sustainability. (Whitehouse 1977:6).

more importantly in terms of what it implies as an attitude toward cities.

1. For example, while to plan or design cities refers to either new or existing cities, to manage cities refers only to existing cities. The general question posed here is how, or if, the act can deal with urban change, and particularly with urban innovation.
2. Or consider that as a process planning and designing require setting of objectives, directions and philosophies, as well as dealing with the substantive aspects of cities. Certainly particular techniques or procedures are used for planning and designing cities; but they form an integral and balanced part of the intent, content, and method of understanding and intervening in cities.

In contrast, managing something gives a predominant, and often exclusive, empha-

sis to the "how to do it" mechanisms; the purpose and content of the urban issue or intervention essentially are taken as given. As a consequence, management becomes a value-neutral technology, a set of procedures and techniques for "getting the job done". But only the very ignorant could assume that the purpose and content of urban issues or urban interventions can be "taken as given".

Thus, by giving priority to management over planning and design, I believe the act to be seriously deficient. Specifically, it effectively ignores — and possibly even precludes — in-depth philosophical and social debate on the nature, purpose and form New Zealand cities should take. Yet, we know that urban matters, in New Zealand as elsewhere, involve planners directly in issues which are not only technical and professional in a managerial sense, but are simultaneously substantive and normative. The fact that they are simultaneously substantive and normative requires not management, but primarily planning and design to deal with them.

A VIABLE PROFESSIONALISM

In spite of what the management thrust of the act suggests, we cannot think about urban sustainability in the first instance in technical or bureaucratic terms: the questions and issues centre on the urban substance, philosophies and directions, not on the technologies or mechanisms. Hence, we must be prepared to face numerous impediments and challenges when professionally coping with the principles and practices of urban sustainability.

For any culture to have viable and sustainable cities, there must be a strong cultural desire to have such cities. I believe this probably doesn't exist presently in New Zealand. In fact, perhaps the single biggest threat to urban sustainability in this country is the very poor understanding and appreciation of cities which New Zealanders have.

Sinclair, in his book *A destiny apart, New Zealand's search for national identity* has stated: "New Zealanders . . . looked to a rural experience for their roots."

Later referring to a 1945 New Zealand attitude he states:

"The towns were seen as merely encampments of nomads who had broken into ▶

◀ *the natural order like robbers into a temple, blind to its beauties, proportions or wisdoms.*"⁶

In New Zealand, as in other relatively new countries, the residue of colonialism is a continuing nemesis for both the art of living in cities and for urban sustainability. Where settlement and conquest went hand in hand, colonisation normally involved a systematisation of city development and a homogenisation of city form.

Formed in the image of colonial power, such as the 1839 plan for Wellington, these cities are often ill-suited to local cultural and environmental conditions. And in spite of subsequent and often forceful and well-intentioned planning and development attempts, the original colonialist imprints serve as a continuing problem, substantially handicapping significant steps to achieve nationally appropriate cities.

Racism is also a major hindrance to urban sustainability in this or any other country. An important characteristic of all famous cities historically is that they had the will and the place to accommodate the stranger, the outsider, the culturally different. It is therefore of some concern that at the same time that New Zealand is moving into an international arena of culture and commerce, where the acceptance of numerous and diverse people is a fundamental prerequisite, it continues to harbour many racist overtones.

Another impediment to planners' practising urban sustainability is the inherent conservatism of this concept. There is a distinctly conservative, negative, and pessimistic tone which the idea of sustainabil-

ity could, and is likely to, bring to the task of planning New Zealand cities.

As a consequence, planners must be in a position, individually and collectively, to grasp the social responsibility which such a concept entails. I don't see how it would be possible for planners to maintain a cool, objective detachment and professionally cope with what the concept of urban sustainability implies.

Yet, given the irresponsible and often blatantly exploitative behaviour we have witnessed internationally over the last decade, most planners and designers today probably do not feel comfortable with a term like "social responsibility", in reference to cities or to anything else in our society. Certainly the cynics within our midst would have to suspect it to be inherently contradictory. Nevertheless, since urban sustainability is more of a normative than an empirical question, I believe the idea of social responsibility is an important and necessary one to grasp in relation to it.

Conceptually, social responsibility seems to be located somewhere between "socialite responsibility" and "socialist responsibility" — between the patronising liberal and the grassroots radical. The happy medium is that those who identify with the term "social responsibility" are essentially people of conscience, who believe in the possibility of justice for all people.

The dismemberment of the welfare state in New Zealand and elsewhere during the last 25 years, however, has brought even more doubt to the matter of how to follow one's conscience, and has significantly compounded the difficulties in achieving urban sustainability. Essentially it has posed the question: sustainability for whom?

The post-modern condition of which we are a part has by some commentators been characterised as a vacuum of conscience, in which such socially responsible notions as fair housing, full employment, or access to services are considered somewhat of an embarrassment. To these commentators commodity culture has been allowed to run wild, and has substituted for the values that originate in production and community. In many ways, social responsibility has in the UK and North America, as in New Zealand, been returned to private philanthropy, with the mandate that humanity should take care of its own.

Fortunately, however, some see the attempt to restore the ecological balance of the biosphere as having profound social relevance. In effect, the very means for exploiting and controlling the natural environment are no different from those that have exploited and controlled the social one. By calling it the urban sustainability

question, I hope we can reveal the critical dimension of this concept, and mobilise not a planning technology but a consciousness of social responsibility among planners and designers, predicated on decent and fair urban living conditions for all urban inhabitants.

The sustainability question, writ large, has the potential of generating one of the most effective critiques of the late 20th-century culture, society and economy, particularly since the demise of socialism in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Cities can and must play a central and constructive role in this critique, not as the butt of disdain by the urban bashers, nor as the counterpoint to ecology, but as a fundamental statement about the way of life of New Zealanders, and how they want to create a distinctive and humane local environment and at the same time participate in a global society.

Beyond the realm of government policies, the choices of individual planners, architects and designers do make a difference, just as those of individual citizens make a difference. The choice of a less wasteful process, for example, is analogous to the consumer's choice to recycle. But to put the responsibility on to the individual's sense of guilt is again a practice of social Darwinism.

The parallel with social housing should not be forgotten: when housing is conceived merely in technological or economic terms, it usually fails to fulfil its social brief. The built environment of cities, like ecology, must be conceived in social and cultural terms, certainly if it is ever to aspire to justice, but also if the concept of sustainability is to be meaningfully implemented.

There are a number of things that planners, architects and designers should do out of a sense of responsibility: from eliminating reliance on toxic materials to discouraging unnecessary resource use (for planners this might mean coming to terms with urban density and mixed uses; for architects dealing with square metreage of buildings; and for graphic designers this might mean an attack on superfluous packaging).

But unless the reliance on fossil fuels for transportation (half the world's oil goes to vehicles) is curtailed, and an end is put to the wholesale exploitation of land surrounding cities for urbanisation, any energy savings in planning and design will be significantly compromised. The form of urbanisation thus becomes the highest design priority, and it implies a different social organisation as well.

In practical terms, existing and new urban settlements should be clustered into more densely packed nuclei that reintegrate a multiplicity of functions; they must be supported by efficient and accessible public

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transportation; they must preserve greenbelts; they must sponsor low-technology amenities such as bicycle lanes — none of this can or will happen without the vision and expertise of planners and designers.

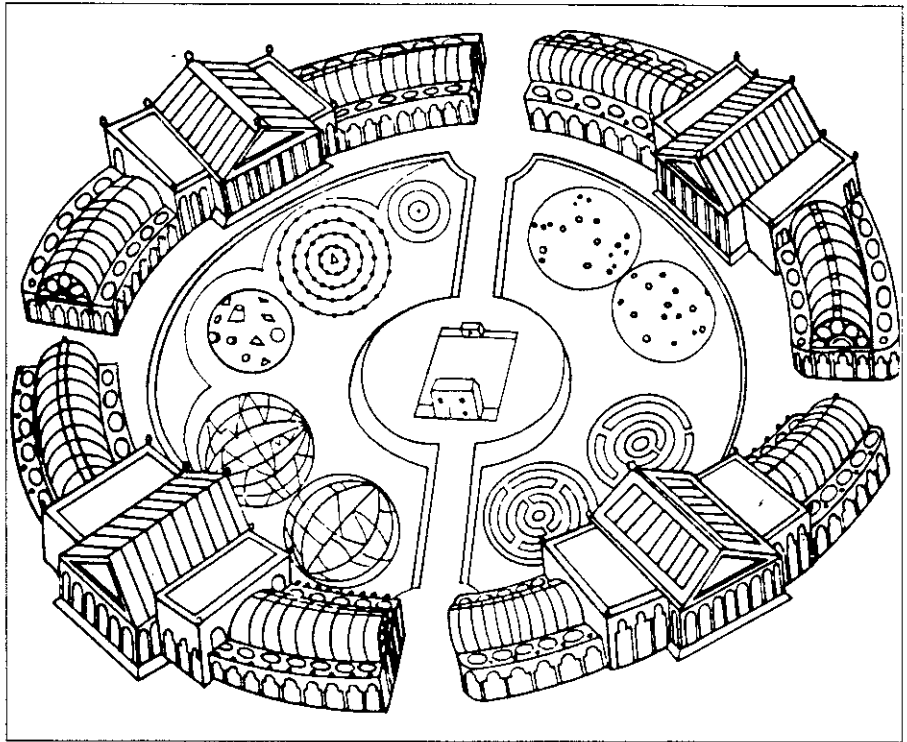
But it is unnecessarily optimistic to imagine what could happen, if we do not know how it will happen. And this is also why urban and ecological sustainability concerns social responsibility and cultural attitude: the governments of the world, especially in the aftermath of the Gulf War, will never of their own accord be responsible about, for example, their energy policies. Only through activism, through communities of interest, professional and otherwise, will a voice of reason be able to emerge. Recycling, or making a passive solar design, is only a drop in the bucket unless it is linked to a greater social process that changes our fundamental cultural values, and that can thus influence policy. As the audible consequences of the environmental and urban crises intensify — the gurgle of rising waters, the crinkle of crop failures, massive unemployment with their attendant social problems, mass starvation in the millions as a result of the crassest of political machinations, the moans of environmental illnesses — the social responses, as in times of plague or war, will become negligent of human rights, and reason is less likely to be heard.

CONCLUSIONS

As professionals we must remember the constraint we are working under as part of the new Resource Management Act: that management, not planning or design, is the basis on which the act is established; and that, while related these are very different modes of operation. Important also is the fact that planners are called upon to undertake not only objective and detached studies, but to take positions, to reflect a sense of social responsibility, and to advocate: these are functions integral to planning and design, not to management.

At the same time, we must be realistic, and assume that management has quite purposefully been designated in the act as the basis on which sustainability has been established, and that this bias cannot be ignored.

We are all in this together: the professionals, educators, citizens, politicians, bureaucrats. While we might currently be justified in feeling some guilt and despair about the environmental and urban crisis, we should also recognise that responsibility is located in the formation of the question. Can there be such a thing as urban and ecological sustainability if it is not socially determined and culturally maintained and reinforced? Is not human consciousness the major component both of the cause of the



Above: Robert Pemberton's "Happy Colony", proposed in 1854 as the archetypal New Zealand city. Source: Matrix of Man, 1968:74.

unsustainable behaviour and of its possible reification?

The "Sustainability Question", if it is not proposed as a question of justice among humans, risks in the short term continued submersion, and thus in the long term will require drastic, and probably inhumane, palliatives. As planners and designers we should recognise that each act of design not only plays a part in the balance of the environment, but also is dependent upon policy. We should recognise as well that a strategy at both levels that does not include the self-determination of communities and the social reintegration of life functions will contribute to repressive consequences, analogous to those engendered by so many of the functionalist public housing projects.

It is therefore imperative that we keep it a question and not a solution if we want to be liberating and that we continue to ask this question of ourselves, in our communities, and in our larger spheres of influence.

The "Sustainability Question", as a socially and culturally based priority, asks that planning and design conceive of it and social justice as reciprocal conditions — that saving the planet and saving the community of cities become inseparable.

NOTES

1. Rykwert, Joseph, *The idea of a town: the anthropology of urban form in Rome,*

Italy, and the ancient world, London: Faber and Faber 1976, p44.

2. Mumford, Lewis, *The culture of cities*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co 1938, p4.

3. *Ibid*, p3.

4. *Ibid*, p5.

5. Rykwert, *op cit*, p24.

6. Sinclair, Keith, *A destiny apart, New Zealand's search for national identity*, Unwin Paperbacks in association with The Port Nicholson Press 1986, p 252.

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Professor Aasen, whose PhD is in the area of urban and regional planning, teaches courses and undertakes research in history and culture of cities and in urban planning and design, in addition to his architecture teaching work as professor of architecture and dean of the faculty of architecture at Victoria University of Wellington. ■