# Cities of Imagination

Then I asked: "does a firm perswasion that a thing is so, make it so?"

He replied: "All Poets believe that it does, & in ages of imagination this firm perswasion removed mountains; but many are not capable of a firm perswasion of any thing."

<div align="right">William Blake <em>The Marriage of Heaven and Hell</em> (ca. 1790)</div>

Chr.: Sir, said *Christian*, I am a Man that am come from the City of *Destruction*, and am going to the *Mount Zion*, and I was told by the man that stands by the Gate at the head of this way; that if I called here, you would shew me excellent things, such as would be an help to me in my Journey.

<div align="right">John Bunyan <em>The Pilgrim's Progress</em> (1678)</div>

For we must consider that we shall be a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world.

<div align="right">John Winthrop <em>A Model of Christian Charity</em> (1630)</div>

> . . . on a huge hill,
> Cragg'd, and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will
> Reach her, about must, and about must goe;
> And what the hills suddennes resists, winne so;

<div align="right">John Donne "Satyre III" (ca. 1596)</div>

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# Cities of Imagination

*Alternative Visions of the Good City,
1880–1987*

"Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist": thus Keynes, in a celebrated passage at the end of the *General Theory.* "Madmen in authority," he wrote, "who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back."[1] For economists, he might as aptly have substituted planners. Much if not most of what has happened – for good or for ill – to the world's cities, in the years since World War Two, can be traced back to the ideas of a few visionaries who lived and wrote long ago, often almost ignored and largely rejected by their contemporaries. They have had their posthumous vindication in the world of practical affairs; even, some might say, their revenge on it.

This book is about them, their visions, and the effect of these on the everyday work of building cities. Their names will repeatedly recur, as in some Pantheon of the planning movement: Howard, Unwin, Parker, Osborn; Geddes, Mumford, Stein, MacKaye, Chase; Burnham, Lutyens; Corbusier; Wells, Webber; Wright, Turner, Alexander; Friedmann, Castells, Harvey; Duany, Plater-Zyberk, Calthorpe, Rogers. The central argument can be succinctly summarized: most of them were visionaries, but for many of them their visions long lay fallow, because the time was not ripe. The visions themselves were often utopian, even charismatic: they resembled nothing so much as secular versions of the seventeenth-century Puritans' Celestial City set on Mount Zion, now brought down to earth and made ready for an age that demanded rewards there also. When at last the visions were discovered and resuscitated, their implementation came often in very different places, in very different circumstances, and often through very different mechanisms, from those their inventors had originally envisaged. Transplanted as they were in time and space and socio-political environment, it

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[1] Keynes, 1936, 383.

is small wonder that the results were often bizarre, sometimes catastrophic. To appreciate this, it is thus important first to strip away the layers of historical topsoil that have buried and obscured the original ideas; second to understand the nature of their transplantation.

## The Anarchist Roots of the Planning Movement

Specifically, the book will argue that in this process of belatedly translating ideal into reality, there occurred a rather monstrous perversion of history. The really striking point is that many, though by no means all, of the early visions of the planning movement stemmed from the anarchist movement, which flourished in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth. That is true of Howard, of Geddes and of the Regional Planning Association of America, as well as many derivatives on the mainland of Europe. (To be sure, it was very definitely untrue of Corbusier, who was an authoritarian centralist, and of most members of the City Beautiful movement, who were faithful servants of finance capitalism or totalitarian dictators.) The vision of these anarchist pioneers was not merely of an alternative built form, but of an alternative society, neither capitalistic nor bureaucratic-socialistic: a society based on voluntary cooperation among men and women, working and living in small self-governing commonwealths. Not merely in physical form, but also in spirit, they were thus secular versions of Winthrop's Puritan colony of Massachusetts: the city upon a hill. When, however, the time at last came for their ideals to be translated into bricks and mortar, the irony was that – more often than not – this happened through the agency of state bureaucracies, which they would have hated. How this came about, how far it was responsible for the subsequent disillusionment with the idea of planning, will be a central question that the book must address.

Neither the idea, nor its treatment here, is new or novel. The anarchist roots of planning have been well dissected by a number of writers, notably Colin Ward in Britain and Clyde Weaver in the United States.[2] I owe a great personal debt to them, both through their writings and through conversations with them. And this account will rely, for much of the essential background, on secondary sources; the history of planning now has an extremely rich literature, which I have plundered freely. So this book is to be judged as a work of synthesis, rather than of original research. There is, however, an important exception: I have tried to allow the key figures, the sources of the main ideas, to tell them in their own words.

[2]  Ward, C., 1976; Friedmann and Weaver, 1979; Weaver, 1984; Hall and Ward, 1998.

## A Warning: Some Boulders in the Trail

The job will not always be easy. Visionaries are apt to speak in strange tongues, difficult to interpret; a striking common feature of many – though mercifully not all – of planning's great founding figures is their incoherence. Their primitive disciples, all too anxious to undertake the task, may create a gospel at variance with the original texts. The ideas may derive from those of others and in turn feed back into their sources, creating a tangled skein that is difficult to disentangle. The cultural and social world they inhabited, which provided the essential material for their perceptions, has long since vanished and is difficult to reconstruct: the past *is* a foreign country, with a different language, different social mores, and a different view of the human condition.

I have tried, as far as possible, to let the founders tell their own tales Since some of them tell theirs discursively or obscurely or both, I have wielded a heavy but I hope a judicious axe: I have eliminated verbiage, removed parentheses, elided thoughts that seemed to require it, thus to try to do for them what they might have wished for themselves.

If all that is hard enough, even harder is the job of understanding how, eventually, the ideas came to be rediscovered and rehabilitated and sometimes perverted. For here, large questions of historical interpretation enter in. A once-powerful, even dominant, school argued that planning, in all its manifestations, is a response of the capitalist system – and in particular of the capitalist state – to the problem of organizing production and especially to the dilemma of continuing crises. According to this interpretation, the idea of planning will be embraced – and the visions of the pioneers will be adopted – precisely when the system needs them, neither sooner nor later. Of course, the primitive simplicity of this reciprocating mechanism is concealed by a complex mass of historical pulleys and belts: Marxist historians, too, allow that time and chance happeneth – within limits – to us all. But the limits are real: finally, it is the technological-economic motor that drives the socio-economic system and, through it, the responses of the political safety-valve.

Anyone purporting to write history at all – and especially in a field such as this, where so many sophisticated Marxian intelligences have labored – must take a stand on such para-theological questions of interpretation. I might as well take mine now: historical actors do perform in response to the world they find themselves in, and in particular to the problems that they confront in that world. That, surely, is a statement of the blindingly obvious; ideas do not suddenly emerge, by some kind of immaculate conception, without benefit of worldly agency. But equally, human beings – especially the most intelligent and most original among them – are almost infinitely quirksy and creative and surprising; therefore, the real interest in history, beyond the staggeringly self-evident, lies in the complexity and the variability of the human reaction. Thus, in this book,

the Marxian basis of historical events is taken almost as a given; what can make history worth writing, and what can make some history worth reading, is the understanding of all the multifarious ways in which the general stimulus is related to the particular response.

Another personal statement had better be made now. Because of the vastness of the subject, I have had to be highly selective. The choice of major themes, each of which forms the subject-matter of one chapter, is necessarily personal and judgemental. And I have deliberately made no attempt to conceal my prejudices: for me, however unrealistic or incoherent, the anarchist fathers had a magnificent vision of the possibilities of urban civilization, which deserves to be remembered and celebrated; Corbusier, the Rasputin of this tale, in contrast represents the counter-tradition of authoritarian planning, the evil consequences of which are ever with us. The reader may well disagree with these judgements, at least with the intemperance with which they are sometimes put; I would plead that I did not write the book with cozy consensus in mind.

There is another problem, of a more pedestrian technical kind. It is that many historical events stubbornly refuse to follow a neat chronological sequence. Particularly is this true of the history of ideas: the products of human intelligence derive from others, branch out, fuse, lie dormant or are awakened in exceedingly complex ways, which seldom permit of any neat linear description. Worse, they do not readily submit to any schematic ordering either. So the analyst who seeks to write an account around a series of main themes will find that they criss-cross in a thoroughly disorderly and confusing way. He will constantly be reminded of the advice from the stage-Irishman in that old and overworked tale: to get to there, he shouldn't start from here at all. The solution perforce adopted here is to tell each story separately and in parallel: each theme, each idea, is traced through, sometimes down six or seven decades. That will mean constantly going back in history, so that quite often things will come out backwards-forwards. It will also mean that quite often, the order in which you read the chapters does not much matter. That is not quite true; I have given much thought to putting them in the least confusing sequence, that is the most logical in terms of the evolution and interaction of ideas. But a warning is due: often, it will not quite work out.

And this problem is compounded by another In practice, the planning of cities merges almost imperceptibly into the problems of cities, and those into the economics and sociology and politics of cities, and those in turn into the entire socio-economic-political-cultural life of the time; there is no end, no boundary, to the relationships, yet one – however arbitrary – must be set. The answer here is to tell just so much about the world as is necessary to explain the phenomenon of planning; to seat it firmly, Marxian-fashion, on its socio-economic base, thus to begin the really interesting part of the historian's task. I have subsequently published a more general account of creativity in cities, including that special

kind of creativity that is directed to solving the city's problems;[3] much in the relevant section of the later book helps provide a background to this one, and can even be regarded as a complement to it, even though they were written in the wrong order.

But even that decision leaves remaining boundary disputes. The first concerns the meaning of that highly elastic phrase, city (or town) planning. Almost everyone since Patrick Geddes would agree that it has to include the planning of the region around the city; many, again following the lead of Geddes and of the Regional Planning Association of America, would extend that out to embrace the natural region, such as a river basin or a unit with a particular regional culture. And virtually all planners would say that their subject includes not merely the planning of one such region, but the relationships between them: for instance, the centrally important topic of the relationship between the spreading Megalopolis and the depopulating countryside. But where, then, does the subject stop? It immediately embraces regional economic planning, which is logically inseparable from national economic planning, and thus from the general question of economic development; again, the spreading circles threaten to embrace the whole world of discourse. There has to be a more or less arbitrary boundary line; I shall draw it to include general discussions of national urban and regional policy, but to exclude questions of pure economic planning.

The second boundary problem is when to start. This is, or was, supposed to be a history of planning in the twentieth century. More particularly, since the subject-matter originated in reaction to the nineteenth-century city, it is clearly necessary to start there: specifically, in the England of the 1880s. But the ideas that circulated then can be traced back at least to the 1830s and 1840s, perhaps to the 1500s. As usual, history is a seamless web, a Gordian knot, requiring some more or less arbitrary unpickings in order to get started.

There is yet a third boundary problem: a geographical one. This is supposed to be a global history, yet – given the all-too-evident confines of space and of the author's competence – it must fail in the endeavor. The resulting account is glaringly Anglo-Americocentric. That can be justified, or at least excused: as will soon be seen, so many of the key ideas of twentieth-century western planning were conceived and nurtured in a remarkably small and cozy club based in London and New York. But this emphasis means that the book deals all too shortly with other important planning traditions, in France, in Spain and Latin America, in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, in China. I lack the linguistic and other skills to do proper justice to these other worlds. They must provide matter for other books by other hands.

Finally, this is a book about ideas and their impacts. So the ideas are central and front-of-stage; the impacts on the ground are clearly crucial too, but they will be treated as expressions – sometimes, to be sure, almost unrecognizably

[3] Hall, 1998.

distorted – of the ideas. This helps explain two of the book's major idiosyncrasies. First, since the ideas tended to come early, it is heavily biased toward the first forty years of the century. Secondly and associatedly, many key showpieces of actual planning-on-the-ground get treated cursorily, or even not at all. Books like other noxious substances should carry warnings, and the message here should read: Do not attempt to read this as a textbook of planning history; it may be dangerous to your health, especially in preparing for student examinations.

All of this, inevitably, is by way of apologia. The critics may have their field day with the book's obvious omissions and confusions; meanwhile – to ward off some of their strictures, and to guard potential buyers against rash expenditure and consequent disgruntlement – I need now to set down the main lines of argument in slightly more detail, so as to provide some guide through the coming thickets.

## A Guide through the Maze

The book says, first and by way of preliminary, that twentieth-century city planning, as an intellectual and professional movement, essentially represents a reaction to the evils of the nineteenth-century city. That is one of those statements that are numbingly unoriginal but also desperately important: many of the key ideas, and key precepts, cannot be properly understood save in that context. Secondly, and centrally, it says that there are just a few key ideas in twentieth-century planning, which re-echo and recycle and reconnect. Each in turn stems from one key individual, or at most a small handful of such: the true founding fathers of modern city planning. (There were, alas, almost no founding mothers;[4] of the consequences, the reader must judge.) These sometimes reinforce each other, often come into conflict: one's vision is another's greatest enemy.

Chapter 2 argues the point about the nineteenth-century origins of twentieth-century planning. It tries to show that the concerns of the pioneers arose, objectively enough, from the plight of the millions of poor trapped in the Victorian slums; that, less worthily but quite understandably, those who heeded their message may also have been obsessed with the barely suppressed reality of violence and the threat of insurrection. Though the problem, and some of the resulting concern, were replicated in every great western city, they were most evident and certainly most felt in the London of the mid-1880s, an urban society racked by huge social tensions and political ferment; hence the chapter's main focus.

Chapter 3 goes on to suggest a central irony: even as the first tentative experiments were made in creating a new planned social order, so the market

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[4] Exceptions are Jane Addams, treated in chapter 2, and Catherine Bauer, treated in chapter 5.

began to dissolve the worst evils of the slum city through the process of mass suburbanization, though only at the expense – arguably and certainly not as self-evidently – of creating others. Again, for several decades London led the world in this process, though to do so it imported American transportation technologies and entrepreneurship. So, here too, the Anglo-American focus must remain; but with a prolonged sideways glance, to ask why Paris and Berlin and St Petersburg were so slow to follow suit.

The first and overwhelmingly the most important response to the Victorian city was the garden city concept of Ebenezer Howard, a gentleman amateur (there being, by definition, no professionals then), of great vision and equal persistence, who conceived it between 1880 and 1898. It proposed to solve, or at least ameliorate, the problem of the Victorian city by exporting a goodly proportion of its people and its jobs to new, self-contained, constellations of new towns built in open countryside, far from the slums and the smoke – and, most importantly, from the overblown land values – of the giant city. As chapter 4 will show, it reverberated around much of the world, in the process acquiring some strange guises that made it sometimes well-nigh unrecognizable. These manifestations ranged all the way from pure dormitory suburbs, which ironically represented the complete antithesis of all Howard stood for, to utopian schemes for the depopulation of great cities and the recolonization of the countryside. Some of these variants, as well as the purer Howardian vision, were executed by his lieutenants, who thereby acquired their own special niche in the pantheon of planning, second only to his: Raymond Unwin, Barry Parker, and Frederic Osborn in Britain, Henri Sellier in France, Ernst May and Martin Wagner in Germany, Clarence Stein and Henry Wright in the United States. Others were conceived independently, like the Spanish Arturo Soria's vision of the Linear City, or Frank Lloyd Wright's decentralized Broadacre City. Each, and the interrelations of all, will demand a special place in the story.

The second response followed logically, if not quite chronologically, on from this: it is the vision of the regional city. It takes Howard's central theme much further, conceptually and geographically; it says that the answer to the sordid congestion of the giant city is a vast program of regional planning, within which each sub-regional part would be harmoniously developed on the basis of its own natural resources, with total respect for the principles of ecological balance and resource renewal. Cities, in this scheme, become subordinate to the region; old cities and new towns alike will grow just as necessary parts of the regional scheme, no more, no less. This vision was developed just after 1900 by the Scots biologist Patrick Geddes and interpreted during the 1920s by the founder-members of the Regional Planning Association of America: Lewis Mumford, Clarence Stein, and Henry Wright aforesaid, Stuart Chase, Benton MacKaye. To this group were related others, principally American: the Southern Region-alists led by Howard Odum, New Deal planners like Rexford Tugwell, even – indirectly – Frank Lloyd Wright. This rich and visionary tradition, the tragedy

of which was that it promised so much and in practice delivered so little, is the subject-matter of chapter 5.

The third strand is in stark contrast, even conflict, with these first two: it is the monumental tradition of city planning, which goes back to Vitruvius if not beyond, and which had been powerfully revived in the mid-nineteenth century in the hands of such master-planners as Georges-Eugène Haussmann in Paris or Ildefonso Cerdà in Barcelona. In the twentieth century, as shown in chapter 6, it reappeared fitfully in some odd and ill-assorted places: as the handmaiden of civic pride allied to commercial boosterism in America, as the expression of imperial majesty in British India and Africa and of new-won independence in Australia, as the agent of totalitarian megalomania in Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia (and, less ambitiously but more effectively, in Mussolini's Italy and Franco's Spain). When and where it was allowed to finish the job – sometimes belatedly, sometimes never – it did the job expected of it: symbolic, expressive of pomp and power and prestige, finally innocent of – even hostile to – all wider social purpose.

There was yet another tradition that half-relates, confusingly, to both the garden city and the monumental city strains. It is the vision of the Swiss-born French architect-planner Le Corbusier, who argued that the evil of the modern city was its density of development and that the remedy, perversely, was to increase that density. Corbusier's solution, whereby an all-powerful master-planner would demolish the entire existing city and replace it by a city of high-rise towers in a park, is discussed in chapter 7. In its pure full-blooded form it never found favor – perhaps understandably – with any real-life city adminis-tration, either in his lifetime or after it. But parts of it did, and the effects were at least as immense as those of Howard's rival vision: one entire new city on the plains of northern India, rivalling in formal scale and sweep Lutyens's definitive neo-classical monument of the Raj at New Delhi; more significant still, in human impact, hundreds of partial bulldozings and rebuildings in older cities from Detroit to Warsaw, Stockholm to Milan.

There is another major line of planning thought, or planning ideology – the two merge imperceptibly and confusingly – that demands separate attention. But again, like the last, it proves to weave in and out of several other major strains, informing and coloring them. It argues that the built forms of cities should, as generally they now do not, come from the hands of their own citizens; that we should reject the tradition whereby large organizations, private or public, build for people, and instead embrace the notion that people should build for themselves. We can find this notion powerfully present in the anarchist thinking that contributed so much to Howard's vision of the garden city in the 1890s, and in particular to Geddesian notions of piecemeal urban rehabilitation between 1885 and 1920. It forms a powerful central ingredient of Frank Lloyd Wright's thinking in the 1930s, and in particular of his Broadacre City. It resurfaces to provide a major, even a dominant, ideology of planning in third

world cities through the work of John Turner – himself drawing directly from anarchist thinking – in Latin America during the 1960s. And it provides a crucial element in the intellectual evolution of the British-American architectural theorist, Christopher Alexander, in that and the following decade. Finally, it culminates in the community design movement which in the 1970s and 1980s swept the United States and above all Britain, there achieving the ultimate accolade of royal patronage. This long and sometimes strange tale is the burden of chapter 8.

There was yet another tradition, though it is harder to fix in philosophical terms and it is less firmly associated with one dominant prophet. It is the vision of a city of infinite mobility through advances in transportation technology, above all the private automobile, that is treated in chapter 9. This is a tradition that runs from H. G. Wells's remarkable turn-of-the-century prediction of the mass suburbanization of southern England, through the visions embodied in transportation plans like that for Los Angeles in 1939 and almost every other place between 1955 and 1965, to Melvin Webber's depiction of the nonplace urban realm in 1963–4. Frank Lloyd Wright's vision of Broadacre City is closely akin to it, as it is to so many other of the major traditions; so is the vision of the Soviet deurbanists of the 1920s; so, in its way, very early on, was Soria's concept of the linear city and all its countless subsequent derivatives. Of all the great traditions, this surely is the one that most melds and interrelates with almost all the others; for Howard, Corbusier, the regionalists all had their own private versions of this particular gospel.

Most of these ideas, though bereft of all possibility of realization when first conceived, were essentially the product of activists, of the doers of this world. Sooner or later, more often sooner, their creators abandoned talk or writing for action; if you seek their monuments, you must look around you. But it is important for any history of the planning movement also to grasp and to emphasize that since the 1950s, as planning has become more and more a craft learned through formal education, so it has progressively acquired a more abstract and a more formal body of pure theory. Some of this theory, so its own jargon goes, is theory *in* planning: an understanding of the practical techniques and methodologies, that planners always needed even if they once picked them up on the job. But the other, the theory *of* planning, is a horse of a different color: under this rubric, planners try to understand the very nature of the activity they practice, including the reasons for its existence. And it is here that – as they have a habit of doing – theory has followed theory, paradigm has replaced paradigm, in increasingly fast, often bewildering, sometimes acerbic fashion. Even to seek to make partial sense of this story runs the immediate and obvious risk of joining the whole process, of getting locked into the very syndrome one seeks to understand. How well chapter 10 avoids that pitfall, the reader must decide.

While academia was going its way, the world was going another. Stemming

indirectly from the community design movement described in chapter 8, there came a belief that much of what has been done in the name of planning had been irrelevant at the higher and more abstract strategic level, pernicious at the ground level where the results emerge for all to see. This was because, in half a century or more of bureaucratic practice, planning had degenerated into a negative regulatory machine, designed to stifle all initiative, all creativity. Here was yet another historic irony: left-wing thought returned to the anarchistic, voluntaristic, small-scale, bottom-up roots of planning; right-wing think tanks began to call for an entrepreneurial style of development; and the two almost seemed in danger of embracing back-of-stage. Hence the moves, in several countries, for simplified planning regimes and for streamlined agencies that could cut through red tape and generate a vigorous, independent, entrepreneurial culture, without too many hangups or hiccups. During the 1980s this belief, never far below the surface in North America, quite suddenly emerged in countries long thought immune, like Great Britain. Tracing these connections, often subtle and very indirect, is a central concern of chapter 11.

After this great burst of activity, mainly directed at the regeneration of the inner cities, the 1990s represented a period of consolidation. The overwhelming theme of that decade was the search for sustainability, and sustainable urban development became almost a mantra. But, at the same time, city administrators and city planners found themselves increasingly in competition with other cities as they sought to reconstruct their economies, replacing dying or dead industries with new ones, and to rebuild the shattered industrial landscapes that resulted from this cataclysmic economic change. These two themes, the competitive city and the sustainable city, came together in a renewed focus on urban regeneration: forging an urban renaissance, the theme of a key British policy document at the end of the 1990s, would restore the cities' health and produce new, compact, efficient urban forms. This is the story told in chapter 12.

Meanwhile, amidst all the resulting plethora of agencies and initiatives, cities were continuing to go their ways. And what began disturbingly to suggest itself, even from the mid-1960s onwards, was that instead of getting better, some parts of some cities – and definitely some people in those parts of those cities – were getting worse, at least in a relative sense, possibly also in an absolute one. As one urban regeneration effort succeeded another, it too often seemed that everyone benefited save these people, for whom the efforts were very often specifically designed. Further, it might be that they were simply transmitting their plight from one generation to another, becoming steadily less capable of catching up as the mainstream economy and society pulled away from them. These suggestions were indignantly, even vehemently, attacked; but they would not go away, because the phenomenon glaringly remained. This debate, and the phenomena that triggered it, are analyzed in chapter 13.

So there is an odd and disturbing symmetry about this book: after 100 years of debate on how to plan the city, after repeated attempts – however mistaken

or distorted – to put ideas into practice, we find we are almost back where we started. The theorists have swung sharply back to planning's anarchist origins; the city itself is again seen as a place of decay, poverty, social malaise, civil unrest, and possibly even insurrection. That does not mean, of course, that we have got nowhere at all: the city of the millennium is a vastly different, and by any reasonable measure a very much superior, place compared with the city of 1900. But it does mean that certain trends seem to reassert themselves; perhaps because, in truth, they never went away.