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Beyond utopia: urbanism after the end of cities

I start with the images of the Plan Voisin of 1925, in part because Le Corbusier is probably the only one who can make both Peter the Great and Pierre L'Enfant look modest.

But I also start here —with what is perhaps the most important single image in all of twentieth-century urbanism— in order to advance this thesis for the Barcelona Debate: we are now beyond utopia; beyond Le Corbusier's utopia, to be sure, but beyond the very idea of utopia itself. We can no longer share the fundamental assumption that lies behind this image: that it is both possible and desirable to completely rebuild our cities and our societies according to some new and better model. To reject utopia also means to reject another fundamental assumption that underlies the Plan Voisin: the single-track narrative of history, the idea that history is moving toward a comprehensive and unitary solution to social and urban problems. We have not replaced Le Corbusier's answer to what Manuel Castells calls "the urban question" by a better one; we no longer believe that a unitary answer exists.

In this talk, I wish to introduce two further theses for debate, both implicit in my title. If we are "beyond utopia", we have also reached the end of cities. I do not mean here that all cities are now fated to decay. I mean that we have reached the end of a whole era in history where the dynamism of civilizations was tied up with their capacity to focus their energies in great cities. The networks of communication that have arisen in the twentieth century now make possible a truly decentralized civilization where formerly urban functions are now distributed throughout whole regions. The functional necessity to concentrate trade, manufacturing, government, and culture at certain key locations now disappears, and with it the distinction between city and countryside which has hitherto defined all civilization. The tendency, therefore, of all new development is toward fragmentary, low-density development at many points simultaneously —development that combines urban, suburban, and rural elements— what we in the United States call sprawl.

My third thesis is that the task of urbanism —after utopia, and after the end of cities— is to create and defend a diverse plurality of forms within each region. After utopia, there can be no single model of urban or regional development. After the end of the need for cities, the continued existence of cities is now a matter of choice. We might choose to live in a post-urban environment defined by the single-family house, the automobile, the shopping mall, and television. This is already the choice of the majority of Americans, and I suspect it would be the choice of the majority of Europeans as well.

But there remains the possibility of consciously preserving the elements of diversity that exist within the region, and even adding to them. The San Francisco architect Daniel Solomon once observed that, in the past, the "urban experience" in a city like San Francisco was the by-product of the necessity to concentrate population, trade, and industry in a single very dense place. Now, he observes, it is the desire for the urban experience that enables dense cities to survive.

Cities may no longer be necessary for a technologically advanced and prosperous civilization, but they embody certain values that are difficult or impossible to achieve in a civilization without great cities. These include a sense of identity, history, public space, and social diversity. Moreover, even in the United States, a country endowed with seemingly limitless space, we have learned that it is virtually impossible to preserve open space within a region without a central city to concentrate population and activity. Urbanism after the end of cities means accepting that all the trends point toward the mess and sprawl of a privatized, decentralized environment. But urbanism after the end of cities is also profoundly and fundamentally a resistance movement: resistance to the dominant trends that threaten to reduce regional diversity. Urbanism after the end of cities means preserving great cities, small towns, and rural open spaces against trends that would otherwise engulf and destroy them.

Let me now return to Le Corbusier and the Plan Voisin in order to defend these three theses. I do not wish to dwell on all of Le Corbusier's errors: that would take me all night. But I do want to identify two of his assumptions that are implicit in the Plan Voisin and that were outmoded even by the 1920s. First, the Plan Voisin looked backward first to the nineteenth century idea of unilinear progress: that there were inevitable stages of technology and social organization, and that to achieve the next and higher stage we must ruthlessly discard the aging hulks of the old. Secondly, I must note that Le Corbusier questions everything about the form of the modern city (except for the necessity of the city itself). All of his utopian cities are capital cities, in the sense that they proceed from the assumption that society is organized around large, hierarchical organizations; total order can be achieved only when the elite can communicate face-to-face in the heart of the great metropolis. For all its glass-and-steel towers, Le Corbusier's ideal city remains within the paradigms of the nineteenth century industrial metropolis.

There were, I believe, two other urban utopians who saw more clearly the true twentieth-century trends toward decentralization: Ebenezer Howard and Frank Lloyd Wright. I am very pleased that the organizers of this conference chose Howard's 1898 plan of the "Social City" as the overall image for "the ideal city". It is indeed a remarkable graphic synthesis of a whole theory of the city and society. Ebenezer Howard was a modest London public stenographer who took it upon himself to plan the future of cities. Working only from the technology of the late nineteenth century —the railroad, the interurban streetcar, the telephone and telegraph— Howard saw that there was no further need for the inhuman levels of concentration of the nineteenth century metropolis. Like almost everyone else who experienced the nineteenth-century metropolis in its period of most feverish growth, he regarded overcrowding as the fundamental problem. He asked the fundamental question: why crowd together in huge cities if this crowding is no longer necessary?

Howard believed that the basic social and economic trend of the twentieth century would be decentralization. If properly planned this decentralization would lead to a better way of life in "Garden Cities" of 30,000 people surrounded by perpetual green belts. The Social City diagram embodies his faith in "the marriage of town and country": overcoming the age-old distinction between city and countryside in a world of human-scaled communities in close touch with nature. The Social City would generate all the diversity of a great city without its inhuman scale.

But Howard could only imagine a rail-based system of transportation, so he maintained the idea of the Garden City as a relatively concentrated rail stop, set in a rural environment. The full meaning of "the marriage of town and country" for the twentieth century would await a far more radical utopian prophet, Frank Lloyd Wright. Working in 1920s Los Angeles, that incubator of so many modernisms, Wright had the boldness that Howard lacked, the imagination to sketch out a type of settlement never before seen, as well as the experience of living in the first region in the world to be dominated by the automobile and the highway.

Wright understood that with a fundamentally decentralized infrastructure formed primarily by the highway system, the grid of electrical power, and the electronic transmission of information, the city can be fragmented and distributed over the countryside. He first published his utopian "Broadacre City" designs in 1932 in a book significantly titled *The Disappearing City*. Throughout history, the city can be defined and grasped through its contrast with the countryside. Once this opposition breaks down, the city literally disappears.

In his Broadacre City designs, Wright finally brings to consciousness what I have called "the end of cities". In Broadacres, there is no downtown, no factory zone, no suburbs, no small towns or rural villages. Instead, all these functions are distributed throughout the landscape. What ties this radical decentralization together is the network of automobile highways, which permit the citizens to travel at speeds of over 100 kilometers an hour to make the complex connections that support an advanced civilization. The totality of all these automobile journeys creates the networks of face-to-face communications that define the new city. As Wright maintained, the new city has no center or edge; it extends indefinitely in all directions along the infinite grid of the highway system. Broadacre City, Wright claimed, is "everywhere or nowhere".

Wright's limitation as a prophet was that of all utopians: his single-track vision could allow for no direction but his own. (It is no coincidence that all the buildings depicted in the Broadacre City drawings are Wright's own designs.) Because the city was no longer necessary, it would necessarily disappear. Wright came dangerously close to being correct here, as Broadacre City type development really did fill whole regions in the United States after 1945. He was also dangerously close to being correct about the downfall of American cities, especially with regard to the now-abandoned factory districts that surround so many American downtowns. But the reality of the American region is a messier form of development in which Broadacre City coexists with struggling but still-vital urban cores.

I do not wish to suggest that the American post-urban landscape —the anti-city as our great prophetic urbanist Lewis Mumford called it— is the future of urbanism throughout the planet. But I do want to suggest that the United States shows the underlying trends more clearly than anywhere else. As the American poet Gertrude Stein once observed, the United States is the oldest country on earth because we have been living in the twentieth century longer than anyone else. (As you shall see, we even have our own twentieth-century ruins.)

American urban planning, therefore, has been coping with the anti-city longer than anyone else. In his invitation to speak at this debate, Pep Subirós challenged me to present examples of American urbanism that illustrate the challenges of "urbanism after the end of cities". I am happy to respond, but I should note that other European audiences to whom I have spoken rarely seem impressed by the examples of current American urbanism. American planning once astounded the world with its expansive vision of the possibilities of the modern metropolis. Given the scale of our problems —and the vitality of American culture in other areas— one would expect there to be the equivalent in American planning of a Frank Gehry, a Bill Gates, or a Microsoft. And yet the most "advanced" elements in American planning often seem like bland and cautious versions of what Europeans do as a matter of course. A few miles of a new subway line in an American city is hailed as a triumph; a good 1990s imitation of a typical nineteenth century suburb is news.

I am not exactly happy about this, but I believe this modesty follows from the concept of "urbanism after the end of cities" which I have been advancing. In the accelerated growth of development after World War II, it was American capitalist land development that was truly radical. In the 1940s and 1950s, when American planning doctrine was still in thrall to Le Corbusier and the idea of "urban renewal", private land developers comprehended the radical implications of Broadacre City designs and "the end of cities". The capitalist land developers were the true revolutionaries in creating the new post-urban environment. American planners and urbanists have been left with the essentially conservative role of emphasizing continuity, preservation, balance, and limits.

To be sure, American land speculation has always focused on rapid expansion at the urban fringe, especially for middle class suburban houses —what I call the "bourgeois utopia"— that arose at the edge of all our nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century cities. But this earlier development was limited by the relatively small numbers of middle class homeowners who could then afford to live in a suburban style. The structure of the industrial metropolis still tended to concentrate people and functions close to its core.

It was private land developers who understood Frank Lloyd Wright's twentieth-century lesson that the great city could be fragmented and decentralized. They used this insight to transform radically the structure of American cities and regions. The scale of their activities was vastly augmented by pro-growth policies of the national government. These policies first created a national system of over 41,000 miles of new highways that made possible rapid decentralization along Broadacre City lines. The national government also sponsored and subsidized a system of banking and credit that placed huge sums in the hands of private developers. With this support, American capitalism has been radical in its readiness to discard older urban forms; its single-minded advocacy of the automobile and destruction of older rail networks; and finally in its

creation of new decentralized forms of development that perform many of the same functions of an older kind of urbanity at the same time that they undermine the central cities.

The principal innovations of these capitalist radicals are no doubt familiar to you, but I will present them briefly to emphasize their radical implications even in the context of earlier American cities and suburbs:

1. the mass-produced suburban house
2. the shopping center
3. the industrial park
4. the office park

These innovations all gained momentum from the fact that, given a decentralized infrastructure, they could be undertaken almost at random at the edge of American regions without making any of the complicated urban connections that used to define a city. Lewis Mumford understood this fragmentation very well in his analysis of sprawl or what he called "the anti-city". "Though the anti-city, almost by definition, is hardly imageable, its scattered parts are often aesthetically attractive and humanly rewarding. Moreover, as a practical expedient, the anti-city has at its disposal the combined forces of highway engineers, motorcar manufacturers, real-estate developers, and lending institutions; all the more favored because its very randomness avoids the need for disciplined cooperation and municipal coordination. Because the anti-city is by nature fragmentary, any part can be built by anybody at any time. This is the ideal formula for promoting total urban disintegration".

This system of urban disintegration has even adapted itself to the profound social and economic and racial divisions within American society that have followed radical decentralization. Fear of being trapped in the decaying older cities has been one of the most potent forces in forcing people and businesses to flee the older centers. One real estate consultant recently boasted that he could go into any American region (even one he had never visited) and in a few hours tell his clients where to invest millions of dollars. And he could make this determination knowing only three things: (1) where the rich people live; (2) where the poor people live; and (3) where the roads run. The formula is to concentrate almost all new development at the edge of a region, as close to rich people as possible; as far from the poor as possible; and along the "growth corridors" formed by the highways. He went on to predict the demise or at best relative decline of every American downtown; the continued isolation and extreme poverty of the "inner city" and even the abandonment of the older suburbs built soon after World War II. If these trends indeed continue, they mean still greater separation of rich and poor in American society; more low-density growth at the edge of the region; ever greater ecological destruction and automobile dependence.

The problem for American planning has been: how to intervene in this seemingly all-powerful and pervasive system to produce better results? As I have indicated, American urbanism has been left with the conservative role of emphasizing balance, continuity, cooperation, coordination and limits. These are very difficult goals within the American political system —and perhaps any other system. Perhaps the most successful examples of American urbanism's resistance to total urban disintegration have been the least visible: preservation. Indeed, one might say that the only architectural movement in America that has had any resonance with the general public has been the drive to preserve the best of our architectural heritage. And here individuals can take the initiative by purchasing an old house and fixing it up. In the context of the wave of decentralized development that has swept away the identity and history of whole regions, we in the United States must value every house saved from abandonment; every urban public space rescued from neglect; every downtown that still functions; every small-town Main Street saved from the mall; every public transit line still operating. All these examples of preservation represent alternatives to the overwhelming power of American growth machine.

Only recently, in my opinion, has American urbanism gone beyond preservation to confront the forces of urban disintegration with alternative models of development ranging from new designs for neighborhoods to new designs for regions. Yet even these new initiatives reflect the influence of the preservation movement in design. Not only do the innovators draw directly from the examples of older American cities; but even their most daring innovations are carefully

clad to look as traditional as possible. The most prominent organization in this area has been the Congress for the New Urbanism, led by Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Peter Calthorpe. I shall risk paraphrasing Voltaire on the Holy Roman Empire by saying that this Congress for the New Urbanism is neither new, nor urban, nor a congress. It is not "urban" because most of the projects undertaken have been located in suburbs, not cities; it is not "new" because its leaders make a fetish of their debts to the past. And "the congress" itself is a disparate group of planners, architects, developers, and social activists, far from the self-conscious revolutionaries of the famous Congrès international de l'architecture moderne (CIAM) of the 1920s and 1930s.

Nevertheless, I believe their work is important, at least in the American context. Duany and Plater-Zyberk specialize in what they call "neo-traditional" towns, reviving the pattern of older American neighborhoods based on narrow streets, houses oriented toward the street, and neighborhood centers within walking distance. Calthorpe emphasizes what he calls "transit-oriented development" in which neighborhoods like Duany's and Plater-Zyberk's are focused around light-rail stops.

Calthorpe has also taken the lead in proposing a regional vision for the United States, especially in his work for Portland, Oregon. Here one sees a synthesis of the ideas of the New Urbanists: a regional growth boundary; a focus on the downtown as the hub of a regional rail system; and new light-rail lines linked to "new towns", with all new development restricted to areas within walking distance of a rail line.

I suspect none of this is very new to European planners. Indeed, none of this would be very new to Ebenezer Howard in 1898. Calthorpe's Portland regional plan is basically Ebenezer Howard's Social City, with some new color graphics. There is the same basic vision of planned, relatively dense New Towns in open countryside linked to a Central City by light-rail. Indeed, so pervasive are these revivals in the work of the New Urbanists that one might argue that they have surrendered the future to the big corporations, and found refuge in an idealized image of the past. There is some truth in this, but also a larger falsehood. To reject the past means to me to embrace that single-track vision of history that was part of the utopian frame of mind. Who decreed that streetcars belong only to the past, and that the automobile represents the future? Who decreed that urban forms that worked so well in the past have no role in the twenty-first century? The past is a vital repository of alternatives to the debased models of the present. In the United States in particular, our cities of the recent past are the most accessible models we have for understanding urban complexity, urban coordination, and urban public space.

At the same time, I do not think that American cities will find salvation simply by rebuilding themselves as they were fifty years ago. Los Angeles offers a disturbing counterexample. As against the relative sanity of Portland, one must acknowledge the continued insanity of Los Angeles. As a historian, I must note that as late as the 1920s Los Angeles possessed a wonderful light-rail system of over 1,000 miles of tracks. But this system was systematically destroyed over the next sixty years to give total dominance to the automobile and the freeway. In the 1980s, however, Los Angeles agreed to revive light-rail and even to create a wholly new subway system. But this attempted rebirth of public transportation has been mired in a nightmare of delays and billion-dollar cost overruns. The poor remain dependent on a system of buses that run along Los Angeles's endless boulevards, and the poor have seen even this scandalously slow service cut back because of cost overruns on the subway system. Meanwhile, the middle class shows no signs of leaving their cars.

Another disturbing counter-example is the inability of the New Urbanists and everyone else to find a solution to the massive areas of abandonment in the "inner cities" or ghettos that surround virtually every American downtown. The American urban imagination has been paralyzed by the scope and scale of this abandonment. Its solution lies beyond anything we have been able to imagine. These are our twentieth-century ruins. I myself have no answer to these inner cities, except to say that their eventual solution lies at the heart of the problems that go deepest in advanced capitalism: long-term unemployment; global shifting of production;

racial and ethnic exclusion. There are no purely architectural solutions to these problems. And to think that architects and planners can solve them through new designs is to return to the errors of the utopians.

The examples of Los Angeles and the inner cities raise the possibility that American urbanism even at its best is too cautious, and too timid, and that any real solutions lie outside the realm of political possibility. In that case the American city really will slowly disappear as Frank Lloyd Wright predicted, and the "the urban experience" in the United States will shrink to a few tourist centers. Calvin Coolidge, an American president of the 1920s, is reputed to have responded to a complaint about American art with this reply: "Why do we need American art? We can buy all the art we need in France!" Similarly, the politicians of today seem to be saying: "Why do we need «the urban experience» in America? We can always fly to Barcelona!"

One larger perspective that might be useful in conclusion here is the idea that in our global economy the significance of the nation-state is shrinking. The key units are regions competing on a global scale. The regions that will thrive in the future are those that maintain the greatest diversity within their boundaries: vital central cities and local centers; beautiful open spaces; a respect for historical identity to balance innovation; a mix of different transportation systems; and a system of culture and education that mobilizes the talents of all of their populations. Creating and maintaining this regional pluralism is the vital task of urbanism everywhere.

(Published in Various Authors, *Ciutat real, ciutat ideal. Significat i funció a l'espai urbà modern* [Real city, ideal city. Signification and function in modern space], "Urbanitats" no. 7, Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona, Barcelona 1998)