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Future of Cities—The New Consensus

The 'caring' nineties have seen the re-emergence of the 'vision thing' in urbanism and town planning. The city has become a hot topic, recognised most recently in that most august of establishment institutions, the Reith Lectures. There seems to be a consensus emerging over what the form of our town centres, if not our cities, should be. This paper will examine three documents which have contributed to the articulation of that consensus, in the light of contemporary feminist concerns.[1]

The consensus which is emerging is of mixed development centres and neighbourhoods, of a form reminiscent of pre-industrial development, surveyed and controlled 'naturally'. The paper will question whether, on present evidence, natural surveillance is effective. It will then go on to consider the nostalgia inherent in each of the proposals and ask whether a return to past forms of development can accommodate contemporary reality.

Feminist Criticism of Contemporary Cities

Berman (1983) points out that Jane Jacobs' *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, which was first published in 1961, gave us "the first fully articulated women's view of the city" (p.322) since the philanthropists of the nineteenth century. Her trenchant criticisms of modernism, with its bleak mono-functional zones of buildings and soulless stretches of open space, inspired future genera-tions of community activists. By contrast, her prescriptions for lively, vital mixed-density areas, with a mingling of commerce, shops and dwellings, providing 'eyes on the street' or 24-hour surveillance, were not included in official policy documents.

It was not until the 1980s, with the emergence of feminist criticisms of town planning, that these issues came to the fore again (Greed, 1994). The zoning of land into single uses was criticised because it prioritised male employment over female employment (McDowell, 1984; Roberts, 1991) and, in segregating areas of housing in which women with children were 'trapped' by poor transport, created pools of low-paid female employment (Bowlby *et al.*, 1989).

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Further criticisms were levelled at the dominance of highway engineers and road policy within the urban system. The predominance given to private car transport dispossessed those who neither possessed a driving licence nor had access to a car (Pickup, 1989), created unfriendly and unsafe underpasses and turned formerly lively streets into windswept, polluted autoroutes. Cuts in public expenditure led to an under-investment in public transport; many surveys have shown that a significant proportion of women are too frightened to use public transport at night (Trench *et al.*, 1992). Mono-functional zoning also resulted in a diminution of use of town centres when the shops and offices shut, again leading to an under-use by women and some men concerned for their personal safety (Worpole, 1992).

At the same time that these trends became of concern to the town planning profession in the late Francis Tibbalds's (1992) famous encapsulation "private affluence and public squalor", feminist geographers were questioning the useful-ness of the dichotomy public/private. Patriarchy, after all, operates throughout the spheres of home and work and women operate in both (Mackenzie, 1989). Furthermore, as Valentine (1989) has pointed out, analyses of male aggression in public places have always met with a need to comment on male aggression within the domestic sphere.

Feminist debate has been moving away from a wholesale condemnation of contemporary urban form towards an evaluation of the multi-faceted dimensions of spatial experience. Wilson (1991) has argued that male town planning has been driven by a desire to control the sexual licence of women and has therefore failed to celebrate the chaos and vitality of urban life. Bowlby reports an ambivalence towards out-of-town shopping, enjoying the security and spectacle it offers but simultaneously condemning the resultant decline in local shops (WDS, 1992). Professional bodies have taken up the issues and the Royal Town Planning Institute has given guidance (RTPI, 1989) and recently compiled an advice note, which amongst other concerns advocates more woman-friendly town centres.

The Three Documents

It was against this background that the three documents were produced. The first, *Reviving the City* (Elkin & McLaren, 1991), was produced by Friends of the Earth in association with the Policy Studies Institute, to demonstrate how principles of sustainability might be put into practice. This has now been further developed into a series of model policies for adoption by planning authorities in their local and strategic plans (Friends of the Earth, 1994). The second, *Urban Villages* (Aldous, 1992), was produced by Business in the Community with the support of both DGXI of the European Union and HRH the Prince of Wales, to influence government policy (DoE, 1996).[2] Finally URBED's (1994) *Vitality and Viability of Town Centres* is a report based on a research study by independent consultants and University College London and has been published by the Department of the Environment (DoE) as a good practice guide. Two Planning Policy Guidance Notes (DoE, 1993, 1994) have been influenced through the report.

All the documents superficially show a surprising degree of consensus in their recommendations. All recommend mixed-use development, celebrate the importance of the local environment and demand more investment in the public realm. These three recommendations clearly answer contemporary feminist concerns.

The City Revived

Each document makes these recommendations from a different ideological viewpoint. *Reviving the City* takes a straightforward stance stating that the benefits of mixed development must be fostered; improved public transport and a higher quality public realm would result not only in energy conservation but in the increase of equity. Women, they argue, are deprived in contemporary urban environments, particularly single parents in inner-city areas. Lively, 'jostling' mixed development centres and sub-centres would provide employment opportunities, shopping and entertainment, thus making:

> … the town centre an efficient means of fitting in the demands of paid work, domestic work and family care. (p. 253)

Elkin & MacLaren are gender conscious, yet there are interesting contradictions which unconsciously emerge in the espousal of a 'green approach'. For example, they have a proposal to put green spaces next to footpaths and cycle ways, thereby creating the pre-conditions for attack. Moreover, they also point out that in order to create a compact city, space standards should be restricted or reduced for housing and offices. Whilst this may make sense in reducing energy consumption and land use, it nevertheless contradicts the desires expressed by women's groups in the past (Roberts, 1991).

The Village Voice

The Urban Villages proposal seeks control rather than equity. The introduction by Trevor Osborne, Chair of the property company Speyhawk, expresses concern about "the breakdown of community spirit and growth of social unrest … " (Aldous, 1992, p. 9) which he perceives as afflicting parts of towns and cities. The Urban Villages vision proposes to reassert the principle of community through the creation of mixed development quarters or villages, with between 3000 and 5000 people on approximately 100 acres (40 ha) of land. Each 'village' would contain a 1:1 ratio between people and jobs and a basic level of services, that is shops, primary schools and other civic facilities.

Whilst this may seem idyllic, and indeed the lavish illustrations depicting (mainly) medieval towns are indeed very attractive, urban villages have some oppressive overtones. Their essential quality is to be small enough so that everybody can know each other and to share:

> … [a] working basis of common experience and common assumptions which give strength to community. (p. 30)

It seems strange that at the point when almost all commentators are agreed that only in exceptional circumstances do communities based on geography exist

(Massey, 1991a; Pahl, 1995), a further attempt should be made to engineer them. This, coupled with the aim of reducing social unrest and the insistence that the 'village' should be in the ownership of one individual or institution, carries an underlying suggestion that socially excluded or marginal groups may not be welcome.

Further concerns arise with the treatment of transport and employment. The arrangement of the village, the authors argue, would mean that the majority of journeys could be on foot and would take about 10 minutes. Whilst it is recognised that the 'village' will not be able to meet all employment needs and therefore some reciprocal commuting will have to take place, the authors are forced to admit that the size of the 'village' would not be sufficient to support an improved mass transit system, except possibly in the form of improvements to a bus system. The relatively low densities of urban villages, which are of a suburban level (30–50 ppa), also make it unlikely that an adequate range of services and employment could be provided. As McDowell (1984) commented about postwar neighbourhood units (to which urban villages bear an uncanny resemblance), at one level the close proximity to facilities might be benevolently interpreted as reducing travel time for women with children, or, less benevolently, as reducing choice.

The report compounded its gender blindness by advocating "alleys, snickets and ginnels" (Aldous, 1992, p. 29), or labyrinthine passageways. These may be picturesque in townscape terms but, as Boys (1984) has pointed out, dangers are posed for the more vulnerable in terms of sexual harassment and physical assault. This point was reinforced in the design of the model urban village of Poundbury, when the community policeman, obviously more well versed than the developers, condemned the alleys in the design on the grounds of their lack of safety.[3]

Vital and Viable Town Centres

Vitality and Viability of Town Centres: Meeting the Challenge (URBED, 1994) is more firmly rooted in reality and allows for a greater recognition of diversity and social difference. It also positively encourages higher densities and a greater critical mass of people in order to increase pedestrian flow and to make public transport more viable and town centres feel safer.

The report recognises concerns raised by different groups of women about personal safety and mobility. The argument is made that measures which enable mothers with young children and disabled people in wheelchairs to move about more freely will benefit everyone. Public transport is supported and numerous recommendations are made for improving it.

Unsurprisingly, given that this report was funded and written for central government, it is less radical than *Reviving the City*. Commercial arguments take precedence over arguments for social justice; women appear as shoppers, thereby supporting the local economy, and as potential victims of crime with just two interesting exceptions.

The first appears to be a delightful case study: the Millgate shopping centre in Bury has discontinued the use of male security guards who were seen as

FIGURE 1. The assumption that all are equal in terms of the use of public space is surely questionable (Photo: Bill Erickson).

hostile by some users. Instead they have been replaced by 'mall ladies' who give helpful and friendly information. The Millgate Centre management think that the use of mall ladies emphasises the secure nature of the centre, which is also given prominence through crime prevention initiatives and 'women's weeks'.

The second provides the only example in all three reports where the nature of masculinity, or at least masculine behaviour, is challenged. Both Coventry and Bath are mentioned as having introduced more user-friendly town centres by banning the outdoor consumption of alcohol, except in pavement cafes and pubs. Whilst on the one hand this might be represented as a restriction on individual freedom, drunkenness in public places tends not only to be threatening, but also associated with male behaviour and male violence (Tuck, 1989 cited in Worpole, 1992).

It would seem, then, that the thrust of government advice is to answer feminist criticism. The intention of creating safer places through increasing diversity, multi-functions, mixed development, with improved public transport and an enhanced public realm for sitting and walking, has become the consensus. None of this can be quarrelled with: indeed these recommendations are to be applauded. The question remains, are they enough?

FIGURE 2. Urban life is both reduced and purified of disturbing elements.

A Gender Aware City

The overwhelming impression from reading each of these reports is that of a masculine voice. Aldous takes this to a painful extreme in a convoluted sentence which prefaces an entire section where the 'promoter' or developer of an urban village is referred to as 'he' and the reader is reminded that: "when we say 'he' it implies neither the singular nor the masculine gender" (p. 38).

This criticism refers not to the authorship of the reports (which include the work of some distinguished women) but to their underlying supposi- tions. Whilst, as has been suggested, strong ideological differences exist between the three reports, each adopts a 'universal' masculine viewpoint (Bondi & Domosh, 1992). One aspect of this is a lack of detailed examination of gender relations.

Although it is gratifying that Jane Jacobs's ideas on mixed use, security and safety have finally been taken up, a quarter of a century after being first written, the time gap leaves some areas of doubt. Jacobs drew her ideas from participant observation of her own patch, Greenwich Village in New York, in the 1950s and 1960s. The world has moved on since then and her ideas were formed at time when there was no discussion of patriarchy and the effects of racial violence had not impacted on American cities (Berman, 1983).

It is a sad but uncomfortable fact that it is not known whether mixed development, increased surveillance and pedestrian density do lead to an absolute diminution in crime. Whereas safety in residential areas has been the subject of much recent study, crime in town and city centres is less well researched. Trench *et al.* (1992), in their review of the Home Office's 'Safer

Cities' programme, refuse to enter into a discussion of crime statistics. Rather they make the point that if the measures they advocate make women (and men) feel safer, then that will have accomplished a great deal.

Valentine (1993), in an article about lesbian experience of the city, comments from her study of the differences between the geography of anti-lesbian attacks and of assaults on gay men, that attacks against lesbians are not only anti-gay identities but:

> … reflects the fact that, although men are freely able to use and occupy public space alone or with other men without fear of sexual harass-ment, women who do so without male companions are open to comments about their appearance or to sexual overtures from men. (p. 409)

In an earlier paper she also concluded that the social relations within a space and men's dominance within a space were more important influences on women's fear than design (Valentine 1990). Recognition of gay and heterosexual women and men's differential experience of public space implies a deeper response to the construction and definition of gender identities.

For example, the *Draft European Charter for Women in the City* recommends that men have to do something to prevent violence against women. Amongst the measures which they suggest are the mobilisation of communities and educa-tional institutions, setting up 'reflection groups', which should include transport providers as well as users, the production of material for the media and a European information exchange on local initiatives (European Communities Equal Opportunities Unit, 1994). Such proposals suggest a redefinition of masculinity and a concern for the construction of personal as well as of city identity.

To elaborate further, the provision of high-quality public space has rightly been given priority. Yet the assumption that all are equal in terms of the use of public space is surely questionable. Public space—the street, the square, the plaza—is, as Elkins & MacLaren argue, a place for chance encounters, informal meetings, loose association. It is a place for parade, for spectacle, to see and be seen.

Feminist literary critics and art historians have delineated the depth of difference between a construction of femininity and masculinity in the act of seeing and being seen. To assume an ungendered response to the urban spectacle is questionable, to say the least (Massey, 1991b). Readings from cultural studies, and in particular the work of Barthes, suggest that the reading of a text, in this case a public space, is not formed by the intention of a provider—rather it is formed through an interplay between the provider and the reader or, in this case, the user. This suggests that the audience for public space is composed of different genders, classes and ethnic characteristics. Architects have (mostly) learned this hard lesson with the international style of the 1960s, where award-winning buildings were thought 'ugly' and prison like by the general public (Darke 1984). It would be a shame to re-live this experience with the design of public space.

Back to the Future

A further point of interest is that all three ' visions' have a strong element of nostalgia. Each report looks back to the pre-industrial city and attempts to revive its ' best' qualities. This leads to a strangely sanitised view of city life: urban life is both reduced and purified of disturbing elements. Diversity and vitality are being designed as products; it is as though the aesthetic effects desired in the mall have been brought into the street. As a *Time Out* critic once commented on the Greater London Council's rehabilitation of Covent Garden Market, it is wonderfully done but all too tickety-boo.

The illustrations in *Urban Villages* present sumptuous images of peaceful market towns. Elkins & McLaren, too, prefer the urban street of the Victorian era: three and four-storey terraces, each dwelling with a front door on the street (Friends of the Earth, 1994). Whilst *Vitality and Viability of Town Centres* embraces the inner-city shopping centre, its whole thrust is in opposition to out-of-town developments, which include not only the DIY warehouse, but also the multiplex cinema and the theme park, hyperspaces of the future.

None of the reports refers to academic debates in either urban geography or architecture about the nature and form of the postmodern city.[4] It is implied that the three-dimensional spatial effects of the globalisation of capital and the fragmentation of contemporary culture can be accommodated, primarily, in time-worn forms.

This point being made is not to insist that the chaos, social exclusion and dislocation in contemporary cities is somehow acceptable. Rather it is to suggest that the best quality of urban living is about opportunity at a number of levels, social, political and economic. Wilson (1991) suggests this in her discussion of the attraction for women of the disorder of cities, the possibilities for transgressing boundaries, for breaking codes. To provide for such opportunities may on occasion be visually unappealing or shocking, but that is part of the real vitality of city life.

Furthermore, it may be that town centres are dying and that a new vibrant life is emerging at the ' edge'. Joel Garreau (1992), in his book *Edge Cities*, has argued that the growth of these phenomena in the United States is closely connected to the feminisation of the workforce. As women enter the waged labour force in increasing numbers, out-of-town developments not only provide a source of employment (albeit often low paid), but their very proximity to residential areas facilitates the juggling of time-budgets which many women have to contend with in terms of managing waged work, housework and child-care. With the number of out-of-town superstores rapidly reaching saturation in Britain, perhaps it is time to take stock of them, their implications for gender relations and their potential as future places, rather than simply condemning or ignoring them.

Summary

Contemporary visions for the city seek to accommodate women's emergence into the public sphere through an emphasis on mixed development, natural

surveillance and the provision of high-quality public spaces. Whilst this vision is to be applauded, advice emanating from the European Commission on re-education in gender socialisation should also be heeded.

It has also been argued that the current nostalgia for pre-industrial forms of the city should be resisted as a single strategy for city planning and design. New forms of development, such as peripheral developments, have emerged partly as a response to changes in social relations such as the feminisation of the workforce. Rather than decrying their existence, planners and urban designers should seek to understand further the social relations which form their rationale. Only in this way can visions become a shared reality.

Acknowledgement

Notes

1. A version of this paper was given at the 'Women, Time, Space' conference organised by the Women's Centre, University of Lancaster, March 1995.
2. Two urban villages are under construction. For details see Knevitt, C. & Melvin J.(1994) Power to the people: view from the terrace, *Building Design*, 1169 (22 April), pp. 14–17 for details of East Silvertown and *Building Design* (1993) Princely Progress, No. 1118 (2 April), p. 4 for details of Poundbury, the development associated with HRH Prince Charles.
3. To my knowledge, there has been little or no research on the *precise* relationship between urban form and physical attack: that is, are open spaces or contained spaces more dangerous? Can alleyways be made safe?
4. See for example Harvey, D. (1989) *The Condition of Post Modernity* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell), Massey (1994), see references, Bird, J. *et al.*, (1993) *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change* (London, Routledge), or Sennet, R. (1991) *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (London, Faber & Faber).

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