

## The city in the post-industrial information society: transforming from a place of production to a place of consumption (2001)

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Around 1900, the term 'urbanism' was invented to describe a scientific method to control and shape, analyse and study the growth of cities. This method became necessary because the growth of cities had reached a point where they could not be planned any more. They were out of control. The Industrial Revolution generated cities of a size above all prognoses and expectations. Poverty, misery, illness and dirt exploded. Urbanists wanted to find a way to give cities a human face again by planning. The classical conception of a city from which these urbanists started was as a place of production. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, the city was conceived as a sequence of phases conditioned by industrial labour: you start with an assembly line. Around the assembly line you build a factory. Around the factory you build the homes of the

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workers. Around the homes you build shops, restaurants and other services.

The publication of a large volume entitled *Une Cité Industrielle* by Tony Garnier in 1907 is a significant milestone in modern town planning. As Le Corbusier said, it was the 'first example of urban land defined as public space and organised to accommodate amenities for the common benefit of the inhabitants (...) integrating housing, work and contact between citizens'. Another title for the project was in fact 'City of Labour', so it is very clear that modern city planning had as a source the idea of labour and production, stemming from the Industrial Revolution. Three main functions were conceived by Garnier: production, housing and health facilities. The dictatorship of production turned housing and health towards the service of production. Workers had to be healthy and housed well to be reliable in the production process. Therefore production is central to the conception of the modern city. Post-modern critiques realised that the city in this sense is not only making the urban environment deteriorate, but is also completely dependent on the environment outside the city. Energy, food, water, nearly everything comes from the non-urban environment. The industrial city is not independent; it does not sustain itself.

Sustainability becomes therefore the central critical argument against the concept of the modern city as a place of production. The 'urban footprint theory' makes it clear that the city leaves many footprints in the environment outside the city – an area 10 to 20 times bigger than the area

of the city itself is needed to support it. So it becomes evident that a town focused on industry and production cannot survive. It destroys the surrounding non-urban environment and, in consequence, the city itself. Therefore the post-modern city moved the shopping area to the periphery of the city, and the production and industrial zones outside the city. City centres became vacant: the typical American city became 'bagel city'. The problem of sustainability was only partially solved by the post-modern non-industrial city, however. Responsibility for the supply of water, gas, electricity, information cabling, food, medicine, traffic, sanitary facilities, schools, public services has still to be allotted. Strict reduction of factories and other production sites was a first attempt to reduce the urban footprint in the environment and make the cities sustainable.

At the historic moment when material products of labour lost their pivotal role in the accumulation of capital in the post-industrial society, communication, services and investment became capable of generating more profit than material labour. At this point, the city changed from being a centre of labour to a centre of 'immaterial' labour, like services and communication. Consumption is part of this new kind of urban communication, as shopping is part of consumption. The complete solution to the problems caused by the unsustainability of the modern city came through transforming the city from a place of production into a place of consumption. Post-modern contemporary cities

are no longer the places of primary and secondary production, but have become the places of communication, services and transactions. The post-industrial city in the information age has become the knot in a web of universal transmissions, of goods, currencies, messages, information (all kinds of material and immaterial commodities, even cultural commodities).

Consumption in the form of shopping has become a main part of the attraction that cities have today for visitors, and therefore tourists have become more important for cities than inhabitants. The post-modern city learned from Las Vegas: with 40 million tourists a year, it is the post-modern city par excellence. The post-modern city in the rising 'Net society' moves millions of bits of information, which control the supply of food and news, the contents of cultural, administrative, productive and consumptive institutions, in a complex vertical structure, which can only be sustained with the help of computers. Computer sustainability has become the core of the post-modern city. This sustainability is centred on the consumption of cultural or economic goods. The exchange of information, of services, has become the new value, replacing the exchange of products. The exchange of products still exists, but it no longer has the classical function of maximising profit. Profit maximisation can be done today much better in the tertiary sphere of the economy. On this thesis is built the triumph of the new economy over the old economy. Cities of consumption have a new way to regulate the contact between citizens, through services, not labour. If people

cannot provide services for each other, they see no reason for communication.

Cultural goods are also subject to these economic laws. Cultural institutions are not measured by the quality of their labour, but by the quantity of their visitors and their profiles for tourist attractions. Cultural institutions turn under the power of economy into institutions of consumption. Event culture, branding, target marketing are not only parts of urban planning but also of cultural institutions. The cities of the new economy are not only temples of consumption, not only paradises of ecstatic shopping for cultural or material goods; they are above all new masks of the market, which make invisible the mechanisms of capital. To tear off the urban masks of capital, we cannot rely any more on culture, because culture has become part of the mask as a privileged way of consumption. We have to go back to the fatal attractors: sin, dirt, hope, chaos. We have to give the cities again the profile of hope. The masses are attracted to cities in the Third World even though they know they will find dirt and poverty. They are attracted by the chaos of the city, because if nothing can be planned, everything is possible. Each individual could be the one out of a million to make a career in the city. Unplanned, uncontrolled cities like those in the Third World, and not the West's city-as-fortress, are the future. The cities of consumption in the post-industrial information age are the new masks of the old fortress.

## Picture this: conceptual models and sustainable cities

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The speeches that accompanied the award of the RIBA Gold Medal to the city of Barcelona, and the recently publicised concerns and recommendations of the Urban Task Force, were quite patently architect-driven: the city is the site of architecture, therefore the city is good and the periphery is bad – culturally and environmentally. This may be so, but people in northern hemisphere cities have been voting with their feet for the periphery for 40 years, even though there are now signs of stabilisation.

Short of making such migration illegal – problematic in democratic societies – one possible solution is to stop thinking of it as necessarily undesirable. To do this, one would have to stop thinking in terms of binary opposites – centre/periphery, architecture/building, brownfield/greenfield, compact/decentralised, good/bad – and adopt a new conceptual model, one that has far-reaching implications for