

## **A Genealogy of the Uber-Design**

Alan Wold

Since the origin of human civilization mankind has used the built environment to express different forms of power. Whether it is for purposes of economic gain, social control, or simply the triumph over nature, every civilization has tried to construct its own edifice of glory. The tower of Babel is an early example. In the Book of Genesis, the tower symbolizes the destructive nature of human pride. Since the builders had built their tower for their own glory, God had confused them of their common language and scattered them about the earth.

A similar story found in Akkadian mythology (the empire of which Babylon was created) described the penalty of too much power in the hands of man. 'The Curse of Akkad' as it came to be known described an empire that defied the gods by becoming too powerful. Eventually the Akkad civilization collapsed because it could not maintain itself (Kolbert, 1).

Nearly every civilization from the pre-renaissance period built its own version of the Tower of Babel. The Pyramids of Giza; the Coliseum, and the Great Wall of China are just a few examples. But the monuments of the ancient world are premature in comparison to what human beings are now capable of creating.

One of the first examples of contemporary large scale urban re-development was Baron Haussmann's plan for Paris in the 1860's. The renovation came at a time when France was becoming more industrial and modernized by new technologies like the train. It also came at a time of social upheaval in the decades following the 1848 revolution.

Hausmann's plan resulted in the destruction of large areas of central Paris' poorer communities, exiling residents to the peripheral zone of the city. The reconstruction included fancy baroque housing for the bourgeoisie and wide boulevards connecting major landmarks and monuments. The boulevards were created to provide a more scenic path through the city and a route for troops to repress rebellion more efficiently.

Worldwide the plan then became a template for many urban-redevelopment projects to come (Steger 143-145).

In America, the 1893 Columbia Exposition in Chicago sparked a movement called the "City Beautiful." Though the exposition was only a temporary showcase, it introduced a new strategy for designing cities that emphasized neo-classical buildings, grandly arranged around boulevards and public plazas. At the time, cities in America had become vile places, scarred by the impact of industrial progress. In New York, freshly arriving immigrants were crammed into shabby tenement housing, sometimes two or three families to a room. The Columbia Exposition, though it had trouble relating to the immigrant factory workers of Chicago, showed planners and aristocrats what their city could look like (McCarthy & Knox 250-251).

The emphasis on neo-classical architecture characterizes many themes that were going on in American culture during the early years of industrialization. Before the Beaux Arts breed of neo-classicism that was introduced by the City Beautiful movement, neoclassicism was much more Arcadian. Among the rabble of cheap-looking buildings, banks, libraries and other public buildings disguised themselves as monumental, vastly out of proportion Greek and Roman temples. The use for this style was motivated in part by a rejection of industrialization. The status quo tried to maintain a sense of stability

and authority by reviving the styles of older European cities, but in America they appeared vastly out of context.

After attending the 1893 exposition Frank Lloyd Wright described the neo-classical style as “the ass in lion’s skin,” in his text, The Art and Craft of The Machine, pointing out the irrelevance of buildings made in the Beaux Arts fashion.

We believe in our greatness when we have tossed up a pantheon to the god of money in a night or two, like the Illinois Trust Building or the Chicago National Bank. And it is our glory to get together a mammoth aggregation of Roman monuments (364-376).

Despite Wright’s criticism, City Beautiful and Beaux Arts neo-classicism was accepted in American society as a solution the horrors of the industrial city. Daniel Burnham, who designed most of the Columbia Exposition, went on to create several city planning projects. One of them was the McMillan Plan in Washington D.C., originally designed by Pierre Charles L’Enfant in 1791, but carried out by Burnham in 1901. Much in the vein of Haussmann’s Paris, D.C. now boasts wide boulevards that cut through the city grid, connecting the Capitol to White House, and several other memorials (Peets, 1968).

At the National Mall in Washington D.C., every inch of physical space has been designed for the spectator, much like a theme park or a museum exhibit. The mere absence of anomalies and imperfections of the spatial fabric gives the viewer a sensation of grandeur but simultaneously lets them know their role as either a tourist or a politician – rather than a citizen who contributes to the collective physical environment. This might in part explain the idea of the “Washington insider,” politicians who have been too far removed to relate to the rest of society. Such a replacement of the organic city

environment with powerful national monuments and exaggerated spaces exhibits the potential for massive planning projects to be used for social control.

This most definitely is what Adolf Hitler had commissioned Albert Speer to achieve in Berlin. Speer's 1938 plan called for a reconstruction of the entire city-center, including huge monuments fashioned from Roman classical styles and a Dome more than twice the size of the Pantheon's. Speer went one step further by stipulating that the buildings would be built out of heavy stone masonry, rather than modern materials, so that in a thousand years the ruins would still be intact – much like Greek and Roman ruins still stand today, marking the glory of a past empire. For obvious reasons, Speer's plan was never actualized (Helmer, 1985).

During its popularity neo-classical urban design embraced authoritarian feelings of social moral order that transformed the American city, providing a sense of legitimacy to the power-brokers who endorsed it. But its style was too superficial to be considered as a visceral, organic place, “matching maximum planning with maximum speculation,” as Michele Foucault put it (quoted in McCarthy & Knox 251). While the impact of Neo-classical movements can still be seen today, it failed as a remedy for romanticism in a rapidly modernizing world. But the idea of the ‘Uber-design’ has continued to present itself, ironically gaining more appeal with the acceptance of modernism.

One of the core principles of the modern movement was to embrace technology, simplicity, and rationality. These principles could be applied to single buildings as well as cities themselves. Modernists advocated the complete restructuring of cities in the name of scientific and social progress. With the advent of industrial production, cities could now become machines for serving the public (McCarthy & Knox 255-256).

One of the early examples of the modernization of cities came through a proposal by Le Corbusier. The 1922 *Voisin Plan* called for the destruction of large portions of Paris in order to build large housing complexes separated by green space and wide avenues. This was one of the first schemes that illustrated the tower in the park idea. Rather than being integrated with the street, large buildings were placed in the middle of a lot, separated from the street grid by vacuous areas of green space. Many of these types of projects took up several square blocks of land, disrupting the grid even further. Although the plan was never carried out due to heavy opposition, its aesthetics were adopted in many American cities during the 1960's under a federally sponsored program called Urban Renewal (Steger 166-167).

Coupled with suburbanization and increased automobile use, postwar American cities needed to be updated. Thus, many of the poorer neighborhoods in central cities were destroyed in order to build Corbusian housing projects and highways. This idea, which seemed rational to modernists, had devastating consequences on community life in central cities and often met with stern opposition. In no place was this more the case than in New York under the direction of Robert Moses.

Moses was perhaps the most influential planner of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. His career as the head of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority (among other things) allowed him to carry out many plans to restructure the city – most them based on improving the use of automobiles. Moses was responsible for Several Bridges, tunnels, and highways that disrupted vibrant city neighborhoods.

One of his proposals, the Lower Manhattan Expressway, an eight lane freeway that would have cut across the city, destroying many now historic buildings in

Manhattan's SOHO neighborhood, incited a battle with local activist Jane Jacobs. To a large extent, Moses was the nemesis of Jacobs, who opposed the destruction of neighborhood street life for the construction of soaring highways and towers in the park. Due to the opposition by local residents, the expressway was never built, allowing the lower east side of Manhattan to remain a "delicate teeming ecosystem" as Jacobs had advocated in her book, The Death and Life of Great American Cities.

Moses was also responsible for the construction of dozens of housing projects throughout the city, and he openly supported Le Corbusier's tower in the park scheme. In retrospect most of the housing projects created during urban renewal were largely seen as failures. In St. Louis, a housing project called Pruitt Igoe was destroyed 17 years after it had won an American Institute of Architects design award. The problems of this project were the same with other large housing projects across the country. The increased concentration of poverty in the buildings, in combination with flawed design, made many projects havens for crime. Critics have argued that modernist housing put too much emphasis on form rather than function. For example, the public playgrounds at the base of many projects were too far away for a mother living on the 25<sup>th</sup> floor to keep an eye on her kids. In general, the design for large tenement housing left people without a sense of defensible social space. In the grander context, most of these projects had disrupted or completely destroyed the community life that existed before they were built.

Unlike the City Beautiful movement, which sought to improve the aesthetic qualities of cities, Modernism sought to create a new paradigm. Much like Haussmann's plan for Paris, Modernist schemes planned for the entire restructuring of the urban fabric,

in order to manipulate the social forces of the city. Critic Howard Saalman warned about the idea of such vast restructuring in his book "Haussmann:"

A city is a living and growing organism, but not without its delicate side. It is subject to fatigue, shortness of breath, hardening and blockage of the arteries, and occasionally to apoplexy. Aspirins and tranquilizers usually do not alleviate its ailments. It may require careful surgery of the heart, veins and arteries and a steady diet of capital investment. Piecemeal transformations, carefully studied for their long-range effect on and interaction with surrounding areas, may leave ambitious planners, hungering for vast projects, unsatisfied, but they are more easily digested by the city and, if erroneous, in conception, less disastrous to the sensitive urban fabric. One thing is sure to kill the city: disembowelment (97).

Due to the failure of many schemes to redesign cities without destroying them, along with backlash from the incumbent residents to such schemes, it became understood among many planners that they would need to start with an empty canvas if they were to create a truly utopian place. One of the most noted early examples of this idea came from Frank Lloyd Wright.

At the same time Le Corbusier was developing his plans for the reconstruction of cities, Wright was developing his own plans for the open spaces of the American prairie. Broadacre, Wright's text, described a quasi-socialist utopia, in which every American family would be given an acre of land. The plans described a widely spread area of houses and other town functions, sectioned off and connected by mammoth highways. Though the plan bordered on fantasy, it was in a way a prelude to the suburbanization of the American landscape that happened in the years to come.

The idea of new kind of urban development, sprawling away from the city to avoid congestion, yet too urban to be considered rural, was an American impulse created by the love of the automobile, and the pioneer affinity encapsulated by the notion of

westward expansion and the conquering of nature. Suburbia offered a new realm of living for those who were seduced by its woe: a fairy tale of open space, individuality, and all the modern luxuries. This approach differs from previous examples in that rather than changing an already existing place, it creates a new one, and essentially tries to convince people to come to it.

Though this approach did not have as direct of an effect on cities as urban renewal projects did, it did drain cities of a much needed tax base, often leaving many established neighborhoods to become blighted by poverty. In the outset, suburbia was a place intended for a single class of people, middle-class whites. This, in many ways is what made it so appealing to some people: it helped conjure images of the happy Norman Rockwell style of living. But suburbia itself also failed in many ways by becoming too monotonous. Developers created huge subdivisions at a time, separating uses and piling people into endless residential farms, too far from jobs or commerce to have any other choice but to drive. For many residents, suburbia has become too sterile to maintain its representation of an ideal rural setting. Today, a new face of the suburban fantasy has presented itself through the ideals of new urbanism.

The environment that is trying to be sold by pre-planned New Urbanist towns like Seaside, and Celebration, tries to soften the hard face of suburbia by presenting itself in a neo-traditionalist light. These towns are pre-fabricated representations of a traditional small town, with cute houses, walkable streets, and white picket fences. Strangely, this was also a strategy employed by the designers of Disneyland. Whatever the aesthetic, these towns represent a new strategy for urbanism in the course of human civilization: the idea that an entirely new place can be planned, and constructed from scratch.

As institutions of power have become increasingly more privatized in the global capitalist economy, the power to create new places has now gone beyond the bounds of city planning. Rather than making cities the symbolic expression of cultural power, singular institutions have now invested their financial power in what can be called “arcologies:” a combination of architecture and ecology. These places aim to place all the necessities of a city into a single development. Just as the mall or the super center were intended as places where all of one’s shopping could be done in a single place, arcologies have transformed the scope of human building from the construction of monuments to the construction of lifestyles (Steger 169).

The scope of these kinds of developments now range from the very small to the very large. At the beginning of the neo-fordist revolution, a system centered on a consumer economy and the Keynesian model, we have seen the birth of the strip mall and the shopping center. Indeed these institutions have grown larger and larger over the last 50 years, widening their horizons and tightening their grip on the economic niches in which they specialize. Wal-Mart, for example, used to be a regular department store but now sells groceries, pharmaceutical, and mechanical services, appealing to customers as the ultimate one-stop-shop. Similarly, mega-malls have broadened their horizons as retail outlets and quite commonly now offer office spaces and condominiums to their complexes (McCarthy & Knox, 245-269).

In the tourism sector, developments have lavished themselves more and more elaborately in attempt to keep vacationers secured on their property. Resort hotels now offer five star restaurants, movie theatres, golf courses and many other amenities, hoping to keep their guests from spending money elsewhere. This kind of development strategy,

aside from starving local peasant economies from the tourist dollars that enable them to survive, also inhibits an unbalanced perception of the reality of the places that people visit. By spending an entire vacation in the bliss of the hotel complex, one censors oneself from the environment around them, denying themselves the possibility for danger, mischief and intrigue. This is even more so the case in engineered environments like cruise ships and private islands.

The aura of such places can also have tremendous effects on a person's psychology. Michelle Foucault developed the idea of 'panopticism,' a condition of society represented architecturally by Jeremy Bentham's design for a prison (called the Panopticon). Rather than being tortured or disciplined by means of tyranny, Foucault explains how the prisoners had been coerced mentally by the conditions of their spatial environment:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power . . . So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects even if it discontinuous in its action; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearers (230).

Essentially, the environment itself, rather than the police or the army, becomes the dominant force in the execution of power. In suburban settlements, the lack of public spaces and the distance of buildings from public streets eliminate the possibility for collaborative public exchange, as would historically be found in the public square. Instead, the youth tend to conglomerate in privately owned places like shopping malls. This is also seen by the separation of classes between ghettos and gated communities, or by the high amounts of private surveillance cameras found in a city's central business district.

If this trend for highly privatized public spaces continues, the future of cities may well resemble those described in early Orwellian novels like “The Night Land,” or science fiction movies like “Metropolis” and “Blade Runner.” The scale of such outlandish private developments peaks in the proposals by R. Buckminster Fuller to build a geodesic dome over the City of Manhattan, or the “Hyperstructures” designed by Paolo Soleri (who coined the term arcology). One of Soleri’s buildings is designed to house a population of 520,000 people qualifying itself as a city. As Charles Steger points out in his chapter, *Urban Design*, the “underlying assumption in the proposals [is] that the design of the physical environment affects human behavior” (169).

The current trend towards such highly privatized environments has huge implications on the way cities and society will function in the future. The only impediment to such a future is the fact that ordinary citizens have the potential to be democratizing force to the way cities are built. This can be seen through the actions of activist like Jane Jacobs, historic preservation advocates, and other community organizations. Even in Celebration, Florida, a town privately own by the Disney Corporation, the will among residents – thought by many as consumers and not citizens – to incorporate the town as a public municipality has never been stronger (Rees, 315). The remarkable thirst for a sense of community sovereignty is a sentiment that will be crucial to the survival of the city as we know it.

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