

Longing for a greener present

Neoliberalism and the eco-city

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In recent years, architects have found themselves increasingly commissioned to design entire new cities: a phenomenon that has been accompanied by a commitment to those terms of ‘sustainability’ which now seem inseparable from the urban project itself. While ‘sustainability’ remains a vague concept at best, it nonetheless presents itself with an urgency similar to that which galvanized many of the great movements of modern architecture vis-à-vis the city. And, as in these movements, underlying such urgency is a rhetorical reference to collective fear of some palpable sort, whether it be fear of revolution (Le Corbusier in the 1920s), fear of cultural *tabulae rasae* (Jane Jacobs and Team X in the 1950s and 1960s), or our new fear: ecological collapse (‘green architecture’).

It is obvious that the myriad ‘eco-city’ projects popping up all around the world would not be viable if not for the fact that they appear against a background of imminent ecological catastrophe – a condition of terrifying proportions – and clearly the rhetoric of sustainability is driven by such fear. Yet upon closer inspection the precise essence of this fear is far from clear. Indeed, in light of ecological catastrophe, and amidst any fetish for windmills or vegetation, architects have cultivated what seems to be a curious nostalgia for the *present* – a pragmatism whose lack of patience for the past seeks a kind of reconstitution of the present in imagining any future. To understand this impulse, and the fear that lies at the core of today’s urban project – the ‘eco-city’ – it seems appropriate to interrogate the architectural rhetoric and forms of representation used to animate it.

Urban design

The eco-city is a mechanism conceived by neoliberal state politics, in which the nature of urban design itself, as both practice and form of knowledge, has changed dramatically. Most importantly, the operative status of the urban project today is strictly *intermediary*. Whereas in the past, architects and planners concerned themselves with highly precise, calculated and definitive plans, today’s urban designer has quite a different task. Because in the current political context, urban-scale design has become an increasingly accessible and unregulated venture for private investment, the central occupation of urban design has shifted to the construction of sophisticated, high-profile, branded advertisement campaigns used to leverage popular, ‘democratic’ support for large-scale real-estate development. Its inspiration is market speculation and its objective is the facilitation of growth. In so far as such projects in themselves no longer bear pretensions of actually executing what they propose (and often what they propose is left deliberately unclear), their service is to lend the architect’s endorsement to an

anonymous body that will carry out the project in its name. The drawings produced have little need for coherence with that which may or may not actually be built. Instead the success of urban design depends only on the composition of images and text, and their corroboration with the language of sustainability.

In light of this, architects and planners have adopted a rhetoric of sustainability that wholly embraces a humanitarian ethics in regard to ecological catastrophe. Avoiding at all costs the pomposity of a political position, such ethics are often conveyed by means of impressive data, statistics and impending notions of ‘tipping points’ quickly approaching. In this way the discourse on sustainability has given new life to an old humanist impulse, while raising the stakes with its implicit humanitarian call-to-duty. Not surprisingly, however, because such ideals feed off an economy of good intentions, they remain beyond scrutiny since the survival of our species seems to depend on their promise. Yet also implicit in such ethical posturing is a kind of imposed state of exception, paralysing the process of architectural criticism. Introducing this silent suspension of judgement, the language of sustainability plays a crucial role in the propagation of such work, for the purpose of urban design ultimately remains to equip the absolutely ordinary with a rhetorical supplement of ethical *goodness*. Thus, by posturing in this way, the rhetoric of sustainability at once deflects criticism while guaranteeing support for its virtuous cause.

To speak of the *design* of such projects is itself a convoluted task, since a truly ‘ecological’ city, rather than resulting from an architectural formalism, must *emerge* from the multiple systems of nature that prefigure it: it is now the task of the architect to identify spatial systems of nature. Thus the suspension of judgement grants the urban project a kind of formal liberty whose indeterminacy reflects the complexities of reality that the eco-city must now make use of. In this way, such ethical claims of virtue reach material confirmation in the very urban form realized in such projects. In a gracious gesture towards nature, great heed is paid to the habitats and migration patterns of animals dwelling on the site, native flora and fauna are catalogued, efforts are made to account for the unique systems of symbiosis that must be preserved, and so on. From this research, these various organizations of nature are mapped onto the site to provide the basic structural discipline to which the urban shall now submit. Complementing gestures like this, so-called ‘green corridors’ are deployed, which gently percolate through the urban, ‘reconnecting’ the natural passageways that the city would otherwise block. In, for example, Foster and Partners’ Biometropolis, a 71-hectare masterplan for a new urban biotechnology campus and ‘sustainable mixed-use community’ in Mexico City, the overabundance of nature conveniently relegates the architecture of the city to a small patch of the background. In this way, architecture, as a material and formal entity, must itself disappear: it is but an unfortunate necessity of the city that it has not yet been able to do without. Instead, the architecture of eco-cities must compensate for its burden to nature with the application of green roofs, vegetation on facades and an overuse of glass – architecture’s triumphant act of self-annihilation.

Perhaps more importantly, through its dazzlingly rendered imagery, the dominant visual language of (ecological) urban design has introduced a bizarre twist to the traditional relationship between figure and ground. The fundamental shift is in the treatment of the figure in the composition. In contrast to architectural renderings used to portray single buildings, where a precisely composed fore- and background frame the figure of the building, when a project becomes urban in scale, the figure of the image seemingly disappears, leaving only a constructed ground. This absence of figure, rendered in hyper-realist brilliance, confirms a growing appeal to both sensation and effect, while at the same time suggesting a retreat of the project *in and for itself*. The distance between fore- and background, no longer held in tension by an identifiable figure, collapses into a confused state of total atmosphere, leaving the viewer incapable of perceiving the project in any terms outside of pure appearance.

Liberalism, nature, urbanism

Despite all of the apparent methodological newness of contemporary urban design, one must ask how novel such an approach actually is. In this regard, it is instructive to recall briefly the history of modern urbanism itself. Indeed, if we trace the birth of the term ‘urbanism’ back to the nineteenth century as a category whose ideological content closely adhered to the political reforms of liberalism of the time, we can observe several important connections with the present notion of urbanism and urban design.¹ Nearly a century after the physiocrats’ discovery of the ‘naturalness’ inherent to social and economic relations, the transformations of the state would begin to realize the full potential of this nature through a nineteenth-century programme of political liberalism. And just as liberalism has its roots in physiocracy (the ‘government of nature’), so too did urbanism materialize a pseudo-scientific discourse of nature, which, instead of impeding the inherent ‘naturalness’ of society, sought to make use of its contingencies, realities and natural phenomena that characterize urban cohabitation. By the nineteenth century, planners had fully reformulated the city as a ‘biological organism’, whose naturally ‘functional parts’ were enabled through strategies of infrastructural connectivity. The focus of city planners and politicians turned towards optimizing systems of *circulation* as a means of unleashing the supreme capacities of a society left to its own nature. Instead of impeding modes of social and economic activity through disciplinary mechanisms, the city would instead make use of and enhance all the naturalness of human relations through a massive deployment of modern infrastructural systems.

Furthermore, envisioning the city through a scientific lens drained it of its political consistency. In doing so, urban form was rendered independent from the actual organization of the city. While major experiments in new formal configurations became prevalent in the late nineteenth century, nearly all products of such work – from Cerdà’s redesign of Barcelona to Haussmann’s reconstruction of Paris, to the development of the grid in American cities – rested on the simple idea of combining materially functioning systems with individual points of connection. In other words, through the administrative lens of urbanism, the city was reconstituted as a set of integrated infrastructures, which attempted to organize the city into a singular system of managed circulation. In this way, what is truly ‘modern’ about the city of the nineteenth century is its complete dependency on infrastructure. What was once based upon a representational model for the structuring of cities was abandoned for a more generative framework, where



Foster and Partners, Biometropolis, Mexico City.



Foster and Partners, Masdar, Abu-Dhabi.

functionally generic systems of organization could be reproduced and deployed at different scales and for different uses.² Thus, with the introduction of the sewerage system, for example, what started as a programme for the sanitization of the city was soon seen as a generalized model for conceptualizing not only other systems of infrastructure but the entire city itself: nodes and corridors, circulation and connectivity, production and consumption all seemed to characterize the generic repeatability of the modern city. Principled in this way, the city's form, whether rigidly composed, or loosely 'organic', would increasingly belie a common indeterminacy at the heart of the city's organization: by reorganizing it along systems of infrastructure, the city could be conceptualized as a kind of abstract grid, whose elements distributed across it would reveal a 'functional equivalence' between them. Space began to be characterized by seriality and interchangeability, rendering value and quantity indistinguishable.³ This condition only intensified during the twentieth century, from the Garden City of Ebenezer Howard to modernist experiments in functionalism, to the Metabolist Movement and countless other fascinations with natural systems.

As even a cursory study of the basic schema proposed by the eco-city makes clear, the new 'sustainable' urbanism sits comfortably within this liberal history of urbanism. First, at a fundamental level, the operative locus of sustainable design remains faithfully within systems of infrastructure and the strategies of their deployment in space. Second, indeterminacy plays an even stronger role in the category of 'mixed-use' – a designation of real estate that has come to play a central role in sustainable urbanism as a kind of economic stabilizer, assuring potential investors of a calculable 'vibrancy' the new city will harbour. This category of development is perhaps the degree zero of indeterminacy that displaces all decision from the realm of design to the whims of the market, guaranteeing the schism between urban form and organization. In this way, an eco-city optimized by considerations for weather and wind patterns, light, water drainage, and so on, can just as conveniently be 'sustainable' as one paying homage to a client by patterning itself as an extruded corporate logo. Lastly, the 'scientific' claims accompanying sustainability are, by and large, a simplistic rehashing of the same metaphors that were applied to the city in the nineteenth century, and only re-propose the same adherence to a dogma of infrastructure-based urbanism: nineteenth-century metaphors for biological

systems reappear today as ‘strategies’ peddled with arbitrary targets, whose only content is good intention.

In this sense, the eco-city is nothing more than the product of the centuries-old programme of liberal urbanism whose novelty now includes infrastructural strategies for the distribution of nature. This novelty renders the opposition between nature and city obsolete, since the city now appears as a kind of provider of nature’s salvation. Strategies such as the ‘ecological corridor’ represent attempts to extrude nature, bringing its own patterns of circulation under the reign of the urban. This idea that nature can be reduced to a mirror image of the infrastructural systems that govern the city paradoxically reveals, if nothing else, a tremendous lack of faith in design itself.

Yet to say that the eco-city is simply the current iteration of modern urbanism in general would reveal little else about the underlying ideological objectives of such design. In fact there are several novelties apparent in ‘sustainable’ urbanism that are worthy of note. First, the incorporation of nature within the domain of infrastructural control is new in so far as it produces a rhetorical inversion with regard to the inherent virtue of urban design. Second, due to several key political and economic transitions that have taken place in the past decades, the city as a whole has become the object of private investment, creating for perhaps the first time in modern history the idea of the *private city*. This shift has attained its apogee thanks to the emergence of ‘sustainability’, exposing purely capitalist urban development to a discourse laden with salvation. Just when it was becoming clear that the history of the modern city coincided with the history of ecological disaster, the figure of the city was transfigured into a technological structure of redemption, granting an eschatological urgency for large-scale real-estate development. Fear, mobilized by ecological crisis, will remain at the heart of this urgency.

Crisis, fear, reform

‘Crisis’, at the end of the eighteenth century, became a ‘structural signature of modernity’, according to Reinhart Koselleck.⁴ Common usage of the term ‘crisis’ in Europe was not marked until well into the nineteenth century, and an expanded meaning and use of the term during this period closely accompanied the birth of modern urbanism. As derived from its original, constrained meaning in Greek, ‘to “separate”, to “choose”, to “judge”, to “decide”’,⁵ ‘crisis’ was a central concept of justice and political order. Its eventual transformation during the eighteenth century saw an eschatological connotation attached to the term, and during the nineteenth century its use spilled over into the domain of economics, from which it would find a new use alongside liberal political economy, hence taking on a distinctly more optimistic tone.⁶ Through the modern concept of crisis, both revolution and reform were made possible. Its incorporation into popular language, together with its expanded meaning, made it a motivational historical force in liberal politics, legitimizing the categories of reformist ‘progress’ while secularizing its eschatological overtones. Crises, from the nineteenth century, would be seen as a cyclical register of history, whose flip side would be reform.

Modernist planners and architects alike have made use of this crisis–reform cycle to marshal political and economic force behind their projects. Le Corbusier’s famous maxim, for example, ‘architecture or revolution’, is precisely such a cry for reform.⁷ In light of this economy, the specificity of ‘crisis’ in its modern application has been all but uniform. In its more contemporary proliferations, Koselleck tells us, ‘[t]he concept of crisis, which once had the power to pose unavoidable, harsh and non-negotiable alternatives, has been transformed to fit the uncertainties of whatever might be favoured at a given moment.’⁸ The lack of determinacy evident in the discourse of sustainability, which is then reproduced in the design of the eco-city, is only explainable by the apparent indeterminacy of the very nature with which ecological crisis is treated. The importance of the concept of crisis to today’s urban design becomes clear.

Yet if the very consistency of ecological crisis is so vague, what is the true source of our fear? Let us recall the imagery of urban projects noted earlier, with its typically bizarre lack of figure. Upon closer inspection, it will become apparent that, rather than approaching the true depth of ecological catastrophe, such projects address an altogether different anxiety. Because in such images the appeal to sensation remains so prominent, it often conceals a clear reading of the image's actual content. For within the saturated ambiance there lies an implicit injunction to view the image with a kind of melancholia, as if it is a 'snapshot' of a life that seemingly 'once was' – an image which, indicating neither past nor future, asks not what could be, but what *should* be. Compounded by the rhetoric of ecological disaster embedded in the eco-city, we can view this imagery as a kind of visual catalogue of all that is threatened and must be preserved. Far from a concern for the annihilation of nature – for nature in such images appears not as an endangered wilderness, but as an abundant and manipulable surface, an (overused) *accessory* to the urban – such imagery makes visible another far deeper fear: the fear of loss, not of a threatened nature and its capacity to sustain life, but of *the conditions which sustain a threatened liberal utopia*. By simply stripping the technological and vegetal accessories from such imagery, this fear of loss becomes clear: the compositions propose little more than a liberal nostalgia for the present – a present which is ethereal, simulated. Ethics in this rhetorical structure ultimately serve to discipline the architectural imagination, reducing it to a pathological reinterpretation of the present.

The 'eco-city' stands as a token of our present notion of urban cosmopolitanism complete with its technological supplement: the paranoid apparatus necessary to sustain its liberal core amidst inexorable ecological havoc. From this perspective, the role of the eco-city becomes evident: it is merely a phantasmic screen, prohibiting us from confronting the true terrors of ecological catastrophe, while at once imploring us to silently identify this terror with the collapse of liberal capitalism itself. And while the notion of a liberal utopia has perhaps remained stunted by the realities internal to liberalism itself, for conceivably the first time in modern history the vague frivolity with which ecological crisis is dealt has rendered possible its construction in the eco-city. The zero-emissions 'technology cluster', Masdar, an eco-city project by Foster and Partners for Abu-Dhabi, for instance, presents itself as the liberal answer to ecological catastrophe: an enclosed, self-contained economic free zone.

If these claims are indeed correct, the fantasy that the 'ecological future' is also (and only) a liberal future must be dispelled if only because constructing such fantasies as 'eco-cities' is itself perverse. For what they promise is paradoxically to transform a crumbling political system into a terrifying condition of utter exclusion and deprivation: their only true assurance is the privatization of the urban realm itself. Liberalism's use of fear in the face of true crisis is neurotic since it can be so easily alleviated by partial and irrelevant 'solutions'. In this way, perhaps the true crisis we face is the persistently liberal treatment of 'crisis' itself, for such a 'tendency towards imprecision and vagueness ... may itself be viewed as the symptom of a historical crisis that cannot as yet be fully gauged.'⁹

Notes

1. See Françoise Choay, *The Modern City: Planning in the 19th Century*, Braziller, New York, 1969.
2. See Sven-Olov Wallenstein, *Biopolitics and the Emergence of Modern Architecture*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2009.
3. See Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City*, Verso, London and New York, 2003.
4. Reinhart Koselleck, 'Crisis', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 67, no. 2, April 2006, p. 372.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 358.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 378.
7. A dictum evoked by Le Corbusier in several issues of his journal *L'Ésprit nouveau*.
8. Koselleck, 'Crisis', p. 399.
9. *Ibid.*