PLANNING FROM THE GROUND UP . . . . . OR GETTING DOWN TO EARTH

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If urbanization *per se* improves the lot of the vast majority of urban newcomers, such improvement is marginal and at best only reflects degrees of poverty.

Populist rhetoric creates and nurtures expectations that cannot realistically be achieved nor maintained. People are encouraged to see themselves as victims and therefore entitled to special treatment. In reality, the urban poor are caught in the clutch of poverty with its concomitant dependency syndrome and learned helplessness. The promise of the city gives way to the 'land of waving palms' - cupped hands and a beggar mentality. Without access to work or productive resources, the most the poor can expect is a shift in geographic location.

Clearly the influx of people to the metropolitan areas is a result of poverty - not only money but in terms of social services, health, education and opportunities.

Had the national economy been healthier and were some semblance of meaningful growth evident, some of the worst effects of the current surge of urban migration may have been offset by industrial growth and the creation of jobs - in the 'formal sector'. However, the lack of employment opportunities compounded by a lack of necessary skills, illiteracy and innumeracy inhibit in any event assimilation into the formal economy, even were jobs available. In consequence, urban poverty has become a major source of concern, which society at large and the planning profession must address urgently.

Rapid urbanization and its concomitant squatting problems have caught planners on the wrong foot and we are as a result having to do some fast foot shuffling to keep pace.

I have likened a good deal of planning action today to someone who has for some time grown accustomed to walking calmly along a road and on turning a corner has suddenly found a sharp downhill where in order to remain upright, has had to run faster and faster, often frantically clutching at this and that along the way to prevent falling.

In consequence planning action today is essentially reactive rather than proactive and a fair degree of arbitrariness in planning decisions is evident. Sizes of erven for example are reduced to the minimum on which a shelter can be built. Residential land for housing may often be allocated on the basis of ease of availability or lowest cost and not on the basis of suitability with respect to the essential linkages any community needs to gain access to the resources of the city as a whole.

Those communities whose access to potential sources of employment is poor and whose external linkages to the wider context of the city are inadequate, can only be parasitic. People resort to crime, they plunder the resources of others. Criminal violence becomes a way of life and lawlessness the lifestyle.

We have seen housing policy shift from 'total provision' to one of 'creative withdrawal'. Whilst the latter might conjure some positive connotations there tends to be an emphasis on the withdrawal as opposed to the creative.

Although the principle of providing serviced sites has merit the overriding emphasis on economy and hygiene as reflected in rows of neat toilets located on the front boundary and facing one another across the street, with shacks in the background, is rather bizarre. Surely something has gone awry when human habitat and environmental quality is determined by the location and economy of sewer connections. Planning should attempt to make the best of a bad situation not the worst.

Without anything better to inform the planning process what we see around us is mechanistically determined by hygiene, a lack of funds and an all-consuming desire for order, safety and tidiness. Very little scope is left for interaction between man and his environment either in the form of man-environment-transactions or in the creation of communities. No choice, no uniqueness and no spirit reduces planning to a soleless degrading exercise. Housing as Theo Cosby at one time noted, is something that is done to man.

With respect to urban layout we need to re-examine the stereotypes that informal 'organic' layouts are chaotic and bad and that order, in terms of cartesian geometry, is good.

At the risk of being overly simplistic, there is a resemblance between the physical form and structure of informal squatter settlements like Crossroads and the older centres of many of the European cities we admire and love to visit. By glossing over the strong and positive elements like social structures, social cohesiveness and individual resourcefulness in squatter areas we eliminate the essential form giving processes of community living and the art and skill of creating viable human living conditions goes by the board. Planning needs to be better informed, its excesses need to be tempered and it should reflect a readiness to accommodate changing and evolutionary urban processes - upgrading over time - and be less blatantly deterministic and rigid.

Whilst industrial growth and its associated job creation is vital to the gener-

ation of wealth in the long term and whilst growing informal sector activities are essential to alleviating poverty, at grass roots, without a flow of capital from outside, not only is the formal sector's but the informal sector's growth inhibited: with respect to the latter what little is available is merely passed from one to another - "taking in each other's washing".

Providing constructive outlets for human endeavour gives life in urban communities a sense of meaning and a wide range of constructive spin-offs are possible. We need, therefore to look at ways whereby wealth can be generated and fed into the system. We need to give people opportunities to use the skills they have.

Concerning what are generally regarded as appropriate urban pursuits we have developed a 'mind set' which includes manufacture, commerce and services but certainly not agriculture. Farming is not regarded as an urban pursuit, it is something which takes place beyond the urban area, it is essentially rural as opposed to urban. Here too our set ideas need to be shaken up and we need to take stock of all possibilities if we are to relieve hunger and give people access to gainful employment: we must exploit whatever means possible.

Although the concept of urban agriculture may seem at first to reflect some mental aberration, it is not: it is widely practiced today in, for example, China, the Philippines, South Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, with crops ranging from basic foodstuffs to the more exotic orchid-growing for export (Yeung, 1988).

To quote from an article in The Economist (1990) it is clear that in Africa too ... "More and more city-dwellers will depend on farm lots and backyard workshops, since their city's industry cannot generate sufficient jobs. Already the vegetables in Kinshasa's markets are grown by townswomen in the city's southern valleys."

In our sexist world the tendency to perceive the man as the breadwinner - the sole productive unit - and to lose sight of the indispensable role women fulfil as providers, still prevails. In many cases it is the woman who provides for stability in the family; who displays industriousness and through her labour feeds the family. It seems patently stupid to deny women access to pursuits they have shown they do so well. The provision of work opportunities commensurate with the skills of the *total work force* needs to be urgently addressed.

Although urban agriculture is regarded on the one hand by economists as 'externalities' and dismissed by development agencies, on the other, as 'backward', Yeung's (1988) statements: ... "Feeding the urban masses is a matter that urban administrators and policy makers can ill afford to take lightly from now on".... and ... "The potential benefits of urban agriculture are many, but are often ignored because most people are unaware of very high possible food yields from even small spaces", are indeed apposite.

Few people realize that, in the early research undertaken by Calderwood (1953) and others, at the NBRI during the 50s, into minimum standards of accommodation and estate layouts, of the criteria used to determine plot size, the need to allow low-income (no-income) people access to land for the self-cultivation to supplement their meagre incomes, was central.

The then recommended plot size of ± 300 m² may be regarded today as excessive. Some authorities have stipulated a maximum of 90 m² and albeit frowned upon, sites in some instances may be less than 50 m²: i.e. about the same total area as the much maligned 56/6 standard type house, alone.

Although economy is important we must be wary of the arbitrary slashing of norms: we do not want to throw the baby out with the bath water! We do, however, need to re-evaluate our approach to planning, standards of land allocation and more particularly the uses to which it can be put. The nature and form of squatter, informal and low-income settlements is in need of close scrutiny. The idea of urban agriculture does not necessarily mean lower densities and further sprawl, what is envisaged is compact residential areas with access to land which is intensively cultivated.

The association, Food Gardens Unlimited, for example have since 1977 been promoting small-scale self-help food gardening as a means to promoting health and the quality of life. This organisation has demonstrated that an area of 29,25 m² which allows for four garden trenchbeds of 2 m x 1 m, with access around the beds and climbing plants on the surrounding fences allows for a continuous supply of fresh vegetables throughout the year. If not totally self supporting, gardens of this size can certainly supplement a family's income.

Whilst it is commonly held that only minimum plot sizes (of in the order of 90 m²) need be provided for self-help housing, in reality the very nature of self-help house building requires more space not less. The nature of self-help is based on a lack of 'nicety' of skills, and materials, and requires space to store materials and space to move about while building. By way of illustration, if one assumes a dwelling equivalent in size to the 51/9 (i.e. two bedrooms, a living/bedroom, a kitchen/dining room and a bathroom/toilet) and its extension to provide for either additional living space or a workshop or shop or a combination of these onto the front boundary with minimal side space and a backyard just large enough for a vegetable garden of 30 m², a plot in the order of (10 m x 15 m), 150 m², can be regarded as a minimum. If one were to make provision for some sort of vehicle to be parked on the site, the plot would be in the order of (12 m x 15 m), 180 m². At this size one gains a modicum of flexibility with respect to the range and choice of activities that can be accommodated on the site.

Pursuant of the principle of maximizing opportunities and the productive utilization of land I am of the opinion that there is considerable merit in using land, designated as 'public open space' for food production. These areas are by and large, currently only used as repositories for garbage and litter. In time and as a community's needs change these can be converted into parks as originally intended. The Victory Gardens developed in the UK during the Second World War illustrate the validity of such steps in times of crisis; albeit in reverse.

In addition attention should be given to providing agricultural land in the form of smallholdings adjacent to residential areas which can be used for intensive cash crop farming.

What is envisaged in terms of domestic vegetable gardens, neighbourhood gardens in public open space and community gardens adjacent to urban concentrations is intended to complement

normal farming practices, not as a replacement. Its intention is at the lowest level to supplement individual family earnings and its food supply, to create opportunities for the more industrious to turn their efforts to a profit and to stimulate the informal sector. With effort and personal commitment, soils which are normally not considered to be suitable can be made productive. We tend to view the fertility of land as a given and forget that in Europe and in particular Britain farmland has over generations been rendered fertile and productive through *man's effort*. With the enormous technical and scientific expertise we have available we are well-equipped to transform the somewhat bleak future of many urban dwellers into one of hope and purpose. Bearing in mind that the majority of those coming to the cities are seriously disadvantaged with respect to formal skills and education required of urban life and that the few skills they may have are farming related it seems clear that opportunities must be created for these people to do what they are best able to do and to generate a sense of purpose in their lives.

Referring specifically to the problems of urban agriculture, Yeung (1988) in citing Di Castri notes the following impediments: a lack of " ... overall policies and goals, information systems to collect and process information, understanding of the aspirations of local people and democratic participation."

Clearly as community participation holds the key to success, decentralization and local commitment are essential.

As a society and as planners within that society we need to reassess our attitudes and ideas, rid our theory and practice of preconceptions. We need to view urbanization processes holistically and exploit all possibilities, at whatever level, if we are to be instrumental in creating healthy and meaningful community life.

Viable communities need to be supported by work opportunities, community services and access to efficient and affordable transport, with linkages, – physical, social and economic – within and without.

There is therefore a need for comprehensive overall strategies and policies which recognize the value of 'sustainable urban life' and which accommodate agriculture amongst other forms of gainful employment, in urban contexts.

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