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A DISURBANIST MANIFESTO

If all the problems are urban problems, why should we expect the answers to be urban answers?

To see beyond the unresolved mixture of past and future technologies it is necessary to skip a generation and try to visualise a new non-urban settlement beyond congestion or administrative boundaries. A network fertilized by 'short wave' technologies rather than a museum propped up by old fashioned 'long wave' street patterns, railways, motorways and bus lanes. These 'long wave' technologies are all heavy, slow and expensive where 'short wave' electronic technologies are lighter, cheaper and more efficient in their use of resources. For example, to have created a non-electronic equivalent to a mobile telephone network 140 years ago, when the first London tube tunnels were being excavated, would perhaps have been possible, but it would have required an army of runners, signallers and controllers, a project far too massive for even the greatest tyrant to have organised. Yet today we can achieve the same result easily by entirely different means and without a penny of public money: our telecommunications corporations can create not just one mobile telephone network but as many as we want, not just national networks but international. What we cannot do either easily or cheaply is replicate or repair labour intensive 19th century infrastructure. There is a cycle of progress in these matters. We have been there, we have done that. We can't go back and do it again. What we can do now is something else.

Meditation on a traffic jam

Ever since the dotcom boom it has been common knowledge that developments in communications and information technology have annihilated distance -- if not absolutely today, then nearly enough to promise the simulation of close proximity tomorrow. Today it is already part of business routine to teleconference around the world, with the participants meeting nowhere in reality but everywhere in cyberspace. But to know this, and what it portends, and to act upon it appropriately appear to be two different things. As a result we seem reluctant to follow the conquest of distance to its logical conclusion in the abandonment of movement, even though -- as the car phone and the mobile phone demonstrate -- it is movement as well as distance that is under technological attack, and will be increasingly in future.

Today mobility is prized but increasingly redundant, if only in so far as instantaneous communication on its own makes great tranches of human movement -- for example daily commuting into crowded cities -- potentially unnecessary. Indeed it is already clear that uninterrupted personal communication by mobile phone is the reason why traffic congestion -- which threatens mobility -- has so little apparent effect on the operations of the economy. This is because, unlike overcrowded trains delayed for one reason or another, cars locked in a stationary traffic stream are still unalienable destinations in themselves; spacious comfortable air conditioned recliners in a vast linear chat room that can shrink and grow by the hour or the day of the week. If the spread of crawling traffic with its tidal flow of metal capsules, carried plankton-like from exit to exit on the motorways, was not still treated as though it were an anomaly rather than as a direct intimation of the shape of non-travel to come -- it would either have been criminalised for reasons of pollution or starved of petroleum long ago. In fact it is one of the key indicators of the new age of immobility.

Notwithstanding many such indicators, immobility in our culture is still deplored. Because of our historically unprecedented capacity for movement and communication we live in Venn diagrams of overlapping circles, moving physically in cars and trains and planes, but also communicating from locations that lack any meaningful materiality. In this paradoxical way we guard our atavistic, energy guzzling, disease spreading privilege of physical mobility -- a tradition barely 200 years old in a world that measures its history in millions -- and one in which it is already being eroded away by the increasing ease with which we can communicate with one another without moving from our chairs. The present circumstance makes clear the promise that we have the potential to choose -- having become a species that can live either as a plant, rooted to the spot, or as an animal with nomadic propensities. All that is required of us now is to decide whether to insist upon mobility, or to relinquish it in favour of a solution to the greater problem of urban densities.

Fall of the pre-electronic city

Fourteen years ago, when I was writing *Theory and Design in the Second Machine Age*, I was eagerly awaiting the completion of a global electronic network that would trigger a massive redundancy of urban real estate and bring about a market in virtual estate instead. At that time I believed that the world economic recession that had begun with the stock exchange crash of October 1987 would be seen by historians as the beginning of an urban collapse in which the historic 'Treasure House' conception of the city would lose its value and cities themselves would become no more than salvage dumps: vast accumulations of wreckage left over after a process of accelerating urban decay following the end of urban investment.

Confronted with economic failure, which seemed to be overtaking them as the 1987 plunge deepened into the international recession of the early 1990s, all cities seemed more and more to consist of the detritus of consumption, their supposed wealth revealed as a confidence trick propped up by a 'credit culture' that was no more than the consumption and re-consumption of obsolete forms, so as to preserve all that was extravagant, wasteful and outworn. As a result all cities, I was sure, were ultimately headed for a fate of abandonment comparable to the evacuations that characterised the urban policies of Europe's cities under aerial bombardment in the 20th century.

In the course of this massive process of urban bankruptcy, I believed, one of the first casualties would be art historical urban planning, the perpetuated, pre-revolutionary art of the pursuit of axes and vistas that epitomised all that was old and outworn, mad and meretricious about the 'treasure house' urbanism that had overtaken the 1980s so that every old building was considered to be of priceless value, even if derelict and unusable except as a museum of itself. As far as the urban world was concerned a transformation would take place comparable to the defeat and diminution suffered by painting at the hands of photography, or cinema at the hands of television and video. And part of this rupture with the past would be a sudden demonstration of how easily the technological simulation of reality could supplant real proximity.

Proposal for a 'Special Rural Dwellings Programme'

During the 1980s a new city network was built in non-historic Europe, only it was not called a city network. While forests were cut down to provide paper to debate the architectural merits of single buildings, all over the continent millions of square metres of warehouse and distribution centre floorspace was being constructed at breakneck speed. Outside the old towns and cities, at thousands of exits on nearly 50,000 kilometres of autoroute, one million new commercial complexes were springing up with no reference to urban context or the supremacy of history at all. In England more than 100 out of town shopping centres were projected, 39 of them more than 10,000 hectares in covered area.

This new 'abstract urbanism of the trade routes' -- its locations are often only designated by numbered road exits -- was ignored by critics of architecture and urban planners. Yet in economic terms it soon became far more im-

portant than the sum of all the 'Art_historical' architecture built in our ancient towns and cities over the last half century. It has taken warehousing, distribution and retailing out of the cities altogether. According to the London property research organisation Applied Property Research there were at the end of the 1990s no less than 690,000 hectares -- 6.9 billion square metres -- of land currently effected by non-residential 'abstract urbanism' in England and Wales alone. In and out of recession, out of town superstores and their associated distribution centres are still the biggest growth area in development. In Britain, while architecture critics agonise about what should happen on a 0.4 hectare site in the City of London, hundreds of thousands of hectares were developed along our motorways and major roads on sites that are already becoming the nuclei of dis-urbanised non-residential 'towns' where a direct and adequate local road network leads to and from service areas with ten car parking spaces for every square metre of floor space -- not one for every 50 square metres as in London or Bristol.

All that this network of non-residential infrastructure requires to absorb the overspill from overcrowded cities is a permanent population of its own in the shape of low density settlements liberated from the rural planning restrictions that began in England with the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act. These restrictions were originally intended to protect land required for food production from sporadic and inappropriate development, but in recent years they have increasingly been interpreted as an almost biblical injunction to 'save' the whole of the countryside from development of any kind.

Repeal of the 1947 Act might seem unlikely were it not for the recent series of crises in agriculture resulting from falling produce prices, and the BSE and FMD epidemics of 2000 and 2001, which have illuminated the non-competitive status of subsidised food production at the latitude of Hudson Bay (which is where Britain is). The spin off from these events has revealed that the 'industry' responsible for supplying lunchtime sandwiches to office workers has a larger turnover than farming, and that large areas of so-called farming land are without useful purpose. Furthermore, under pressure of these events, the principles of the 1947 Act have been breached already by the diversification of land use permitted to farmers faced with cheap food imports and falling subsidies. Drawing the teeth of the 1947 Act could permit farmers and other landowners to sell off house building plots in selected locations on condition that they took advantage of attractive landscape features such as copses, woods, valleys and views, so as to permit the ensuing dwellings to be invisibly sewn into the landscape with minimal visual intrusion. Preliminary investigations into such a measure, suggest that between 1.5 and 2 million housebuilding sites within range of existing distribution nodes and A-road and motorway junctions would come onto the housing market within a year of the launch of such a scheme, which would immediately release much of the pressure for more building land in the South East of England.

The Special Rural Dwelling (SRD) sites made available would be most numerous in the least populated parts of the country, and least numerous in the densely populated South East, thus applying an immediate counterbalance to the 'town cramming' favoured by urban enthusiasts today. The Special Rural Dwellings Programm (SRDP) will create post-agricultural, dispersed settlements, ephemeralised, entropic and evenly distributed. One that is contrary to the whole tradition of high assumed value that still rules our old 'Treasure House' cities. This form of settlement will mark the coming of an urbanism of insignificant, undifferentiated, uniformly distributed particles without heritage, without history. In conformity with our age we shall see the public open space of our cities leak away into instantaneous electronic communications and transportation networks. With the advent of a Special Rural Dwellings Programme the flexibility of our built and mobile environment would spread like a net over all the whole country offering ease and freedom in place of urban strife.