Urban development
Reviving and activating Utopian strategies

Adrian Atkinson

‘Perhaps the planning process is inherently “out of control”’, writes Adrian Atkinson in this article (see City 8(1), pp.89–108 for a related discussion). A refusal to take responsibility for our settlements as they grow in uncontrolled ways, alongside unsustainable inputs of non-renewable fuels sets the tone for this deeply questioning article. Atkinson laments that in our ‘post-modern’ world we ‘avoid looking at the larger picture and thus the causes of worsening conditions’, but also urges us to ‘return to more strategic thinking’ embedded in participatory planning processes. Atkinson focuses on the global south where increasing social conflict and insecurity and degraded environmental conditions are a universal accompaniment to urbanization. More worryingly, current urbanization is not associated with industrialization, and leaves huge swathes of the population disconnected. Drawing on case studies from local initiatives in the global south, Atkinson concludes that planning processes are tolerated in the global South as long as they focus on charity work amongst the poor. Transforming local initiatives into systemic change requires ‘a shift in our collective consciousness and taking hold of the means to determine how our future will be organized’.

Over the years a series of presumptions have become what Galbraith referred to as ‘conventional wisdom’ concerning what ‘development’ is supposed to be about and what in the long run it will yield. That all ‘underdeveloped’, now renamed ‘developing’ countries would eventually industrialize and urbanize as happened in Europe, North America—and Japan showing that others can do it as well—seemed to be self-evident. In fact, in recent years it has become increasingly obvious that industrialization remains a characteristic of just a few countries and regions. However, the increasingly fragmented way in which anybody much is looking into the future means that nobody seems to care any more—or at least be prepared to try to do something about it. Attention simply focuses on how in a very piecemeal way to deal with the consequences of the fact that, whilst rural economies are generating diminishing incomes, industrialization is not happening either and hence, without an economic base, poverty is spreading throughout what is now termed ‘the South’.

On the bright side of conventional thinking it appears that urbanization is happening as expected and that we are just passing the half-way mark along the road to a more or less completely urbanized world. That is to say that the global urbanization process is in its final stages. In the North ‘rural’ has almost lost its meaning, farming having become largely an industrial process employing few and erstwhile villages having evolved into chic places for middle-class urbanites to hang out. Even much of Latin America is now largely urbanized and only in Africa and Asia is the peasant way of life still a substantial
feature of social and economic, if not political, life and there too it appears to be in terminal decline (Bryceson et al., 2000).

We cannot avoid, however, the evident serious problems and in the medium term clear dangers in what is unfolding by way of spatial restructuring of social and economic life that goes well beyond simply worrying about spreading poverty. The cultural, social and physical dysfunctional-ity of the emerging urban world involving increasing social conflict and insecurity and degraded environmental conditions are an almost universal accompaniment to the urbanization process in the South. Informal settlements and economies are rapidly increasing in extent, defining the lives of much of the citizenry who exist on the margins of survival. In the medium term the sustainability of this way of organ-izing life must be seriously questioned.1

In contrast with the middle years of the 20th century, it is extremely unfashionable today to think coherently about the future consequences of what is happening or of what steps might be taken to create urban societies and conditions worthy of common human dignity and which can be genuinely sustained into the indefinite future. In this ‘post-modern’ world things just happen and intellect is restricted to observing from the margins,2 at best becoming involved in small-scale actions that aim (at least) to ameliorate the worst conditions of the poor—but avoid looking at the larger picture and thus what are the causes of the worsening conditions.

The purpose of this paper is to urge a return to more strategic thinking about the utility and wisdom of what is happening by way of urbanization in the South and, indeed by reflection, the forms of settlement in the North, with a view to reviving coherent thinking about steering settlement patterns and processes in directions more likely to satisfy the needs of citizens sustainably. It is thus necessary to start by sketching the larger picture, looking at the forms of, and forces driving, urbanization processes. The paper then moves on to look at the way in which global processes are not only driving urbanization in the South but at the same time disempowering the resulting citizenry. This disempowerment proceeds via the removal of skills, knowledge and control over local resources expressed in particular through the undermining of local economies. Ownership of resources is increasingly concentrated in fewer hands with a weak sense of social and environmental responsibility. Social control over the use of resources—via government or any other social organizational mecha-nisms—is progressively weakened or aban-doned within the current framework of liberal policies.

We are more or less conscious that current ‘conventional wisdom’ that undermines our confidence to think and act more strategically has to do with the ‘collapse of commu-nism’ and with it the whole enlightened aspiration to create a rationally organized world (Atkinson, 2004). The prevailing sensi-bility feels and thence acts as if the notion that we can plan rationally has failed. Whether it really failed or was, rather, pushed aside by the unrelenting flood of belligerent liberal propaganda, is genuinely questionable. Whilst it is not the intention here to carry out—the very necessary—post-mortem, it is nevertheless asserted that the main reason for failure was authoritarianism of the communist system and lack of space that it gave to the people to design their own development process. Hence the necessity to reconceive strategic thinking and acting as participatory planning process.

Over the past 10 years there has been genuine progress in at least experimenting with participatory decision-making in urban management and the issue becomes: how to build this into a more coherent and effective system of governance and how to raise the sense of self-responsibility and the level of action to one that is able to master strategic decisions and not just restrict itself to solving immediately pressing problems of survival and small-scale neighbourhood improve-ments. The paper ends by looking back over
the history of Utopian urban and regional planning to see how this needs to be revised to make connection into new, bottom-up governance processes where the local and regional economy, and in this context the management of local resources, is returned to local hands.

Urbanization processes and the resulting structures

Until some 50 years ago rural existence, expressed in a multitude of different cultural forms, defined the lives of the vast majority of humanity. Notwithstanding the Rousseauian idea that urban life represents a moral decline of humanity, the idea that ‘urbaneness’ is superior to ‘rurality’ is nevertheless deeply embedded in Occidental—and indeed in Oriental—culture. The terms ‘politics’ and indeed ‘civilization’ are each built on, respectively, the Greek and Latin terms for ‘city’, and the term ‘idiot’ (and hence Karl Marx’s reference to ‘rural idiocy’) derives from the ancient Greek term for ‘peasant’.

Perhaps this is obvious insofar as all manner of aspects of status have been embedded in the urban context. Emperors, kings and all manner of power structures, surrounded by their entourages and administrators, inhabited and emanated from cities. Religious leaders and their edifices and those who manufactured goods out of the raw materials obtained from the countryside, together with traders and financiers also gathered together to build cities. Wealth and power concentrated in cities attracting those with ambition or simply seeking a ‘better life’ in the terms of their own cultural universe.

However, there were also important cultures that did not encourage urbanization, including the herdsman of central Asia and, most important, Hindu culture, with its networks of specialized villages that diffused spatially most of what in Europe and the Orient drove the urbanization process forward. We might in the abstract ask if urbs are necessary to achieve the ‘good life’ or might they even detract from it for a significant portion of humanity? But in practice we can see an important ingredient of the spatial distribution of people is the structure of cultural practices worked out in particular environments over millennia of human evolution.

A very different perspective sees cultural evolution as being driven by the increasing employment of energy by society. From this point of view, urbanization was until recent centuries inhibited by the diffuse nature of energy sources and difficulty of supplying concentrations of human activity. The rapid changes in the configuration of spatial distribution of populations in the North over the past two centuries are clearly related to changes in the exploitation of energy sources. This started with intensification in the use of water power and then, much more forcefully, urbanization over coal fields. The invention of electricity and the rapid extension of electricity grids from the 1880s further facilitated urban growth along tramways and industries, now relatively footloose, tending to locate nearer to consumer markets. The final development in the industrialized North happened following the Second World War with the ubiquitous spread of the car and highway-based transport. This coincided with the final stages in the industrialization of agriculture spreading housing, industry and some major service facilities across vast areas dependent on massive inputs of (non-renewable) energy.

Jean Gotmann’s major study ‘Megalopolis’ was the first attempt to understand this phenomenon as it was occurring along the north-east coastal region of the USA—subsequently known as ‘Boswash’. But increasingly the phenomenon was seen to be expressed in metropolitan complexes right across the USA. Historic analyses indicated that in fact the process had been ongoing since the late 19th century in the sense that the core and thence the progressive rings of suburbs went through a phase of development, peaked in terms of population density and thence declined.
This process has also been taking place in European cities and regions, albeit displaying the more advanced dispersion two decades after it became evident in the USA. European’s remain coy about the de facto ‘end of rural’—what Sieverts refers to as ‘Zwischenstadt’ (Sieverts, 1999) or ‘towns between cities’—that in the end make up interlinked urban conglomerations right across Western Europe with, in practice, urban living culture and conditions as prevalent in erstwhile villages and towns as in the ancient city centres and more recent suburbs. Whilst urban planners across Europe have considered it their duty, often backed by relevant legislation, to defend the rural from urbanization, the reasons for this remain predominantly romantic, rather than objectively critical: the idea of unspoiled countryside and the rural way of life remains a strong vision. The actuality of the lack of economic relations between cities and surrounding regions and the dependence of the whole configuration on non-renewable energy resources, whilst occasionally included in the argument for urban containment, have, however, made little impact.

This is not to say that the culture of living in cities is dead. Even in the USA—especially in New York but also to a lesser extent in most US cities, there are, as well as the urban poor, middle classes and elites—and particularly youth—who choose to live in dense city centres. This is more the case in continental Europe (and also in Latin America and China) that robust urban living traditions continue. Indeed, there has been continuous revitalization of city centres: ‘gentrification’ as a movement wherein the young middle classes began to reverse the long deterioration of inner urban housing, started in the 1960s such that in the case of London, the long decline of population across the middle years of the 20th century was strongly reversed in the 1990s. This has not, however, counteracted the broader tendency of populations and economic activities to become, overall, more dispersed across the erstwhile rural landscape.

The impulse to design urban living conditions

All of this sounds as if urbanization is but an epiphenomenon of inner forces of cultural, social and economic evolution—or the evolution of the availability of energy—with no attempt at application of the human intellect concerning what might in practice be a form of spatial distribution of human settlement and activity that would better satisfy human needs in a sustainable way. Whilst on the surface this seems almost overwhelmingly the case, particularly in recent decades, there is nevertheless enough evidence that, when a society generates the will, cities and their rural contexts can be and are planned in a conscious way to provide for the reasonable needs of all citizens. It is useful at this point to remind ourselves of some good examples.

Harappan culture in the Indus Valley some 4000 years ago clearly understood the need for sanitary infrastructure and cities were built in ways that facilitated their efficient management. It seems the great knowledge of technology and health we have today was not necessary to perceive of simple ways to obviate basic problems of urban sanitation. The Greek and Roman colonies, on the other hand, show more than a functional attitude to infrastructure. Following the sack of Miletus in Asia Minor in 479 BC, Hippodamus, a citizen of the city—and nowadays called the ‘Father of Urban Planning’—developed rules which he convinced the Milesans to adopt in the rebuilding of their city and which became the rules in terms of location of key structures and spaces and thence the general infrastructure serving the residential areas that governed the foundation of over 60 small towns around the Mediterranean. Visiting the sites of some of these colonies today provides a salutary lesson not only in the potential efficiency of planning but also the way in which the particular character of the site can be used to bind the citizenry into the drama of the surrounding landscape. Furthermore, these colonies were reproduced out of a policy to maintain the scale of
community. With the growth of populations over two centuries, towns were not encouraged to grow but rather to spawn new communities on new sites.

The Roman Empire also involved a process of urbanization of hitherto unurbanized peoples. Thousands of legionary camps were built based on the same master plan, many of which developed into permanent towns. Rules governed the construction of these ‘colonias’, involving effective infrastructure (often impressive water supply systems and sewerage/drainage), the appropriate siting of the main buildings and spaces and symbolic monuments such as triumphal arches, and street layout appropriate to serve as a basis for residential construction. Similar rules were applied at times through subsequent European history, arguably the most impressive of which were those governing the foundation of well over a thousand cities in Latin America governed by rules perpetrated by the Spanish Crown. Enough of these survive as inner cities of what in many cases have become endless megacities to see what a planned city can do in terms of creating an efficient and pleasant living environment.

Even the 20th century had its highlights in terms of thoughtful planning of human settlements that successfully obviated many of the serious problems that the urbanization processes today are facing. True, the British New Towns may be criticized today for not adequately addressing the issue of excessive use of energy—and in the end for not succeeding in creating the self-reliance originally intended as a consequence in great part of the lack of foresight regarding the changing structure of industry and employment (Hall et al., 1973)—nevertheless, many positive lessons can be learned from the attempts, especially in terms of the strategic notion of appropriate size and containment. There may well be even more significant lessons to be learned from the construction of over a thousand new towns in the Soviet Union, the experience of which awaits a comprehensive evaluation.

Of course, in the face of the fact that cities have more often than not simply happened, ‘organically’, with minimal planning—and, once there, the reorganization of which has proved to be a greater challenge than almost any society has been prepared to face—we must ask ourselves under what circumstances it becomes possible to ‘design’ cities, why societies that once planned stopped planning and, of course, whether designed cities are necessarily superior to cities that just happen. These questions cannot be asked in general but only in relation to particular circumstances. What can, however, be said is that a coherent planning of the built form depends on many factors that have themselves little to do with construction. Above all, there has to be a broad social agreement—at one extreme via authoritarian dictat but in principal, alternatively, through widespread tacit or active social agreement and what become vernacular sets of planning rules. To an extent such rules have prevailed in many if not most places in certain aspects of the built environment, in market or town squares and in the form of individual houses and their agglomeration into villages and towns. ‘Planning’, however, denotes a qualitatively more coherent level of agreement.

Finally, reference must be made to the extremity of two aspects of urbanization today. The first is the sheer scale of our settlements that seems to cow the planning imagination into a refusal to take responsibility. In the North we see the piecemeal nature of planning interventions that manage to keep the cities more or less functioning (albeit with massive inputs of non-renewable fossil fuels to accomplish this). In the South, plans are made but observed only in a few, superficial gestures, as urban growth progresses at a hectic rate, uncontrolled and observing few rules and in practice deeply dysfunctional in terms either of efficiency or the creation of a humanly secure and pleasant environment. Perhaps the process is inherently ‘out of control’. However, in today’s globalizing world there is a logic and a control over certain dimensions of what is
happening that actively discourages effective spatial planning which we will look at in more detail as this paper progresses.

Globalization and urban development in Asia and Africa today

As noted in the introduction, today the ‘urban’, at least in the North, is ubiquitous where it is difficult to say where ‘urban’ ends or, indeed, if there is anything other than urban. In this respect, it becomes tenuous to gauge current urban form against those of the past in that one is not comparing like with like. One of the most coherent and vociferous critics of the modern urbanization process, Murray Bookchin, in acknowledging this, asks what has been gained by ‘global cities’ over traditional cultures of appropriately scaled cities, civic life and citizenship and a clear contrast between urban and rural (Bookchin, 1974, 1987). This is, indeed, a question that needs to be asked: against what criteria should we judge the ‘universalization of the urban’ in the manner in which we are experiencing it today? Can we really point to some kind of urban ideal that is superior to this?

Until recently the transition of the bulk of the population to living an urban existence was restricted to Europe and North America such that, just 50 years ago some 80% of the world’s population lived an overwhelmingly rural existence as peasants, employees of rural enterprises, those providing immediate services to these populations—and their families. Before embarking on a more extended critique of the spatial reorganization of human settlement and activity, it is necessary to look in a little detail at the processes and mechanisms that are driving it: it is not very useful to criticize the end result without some knowledge of how the process works.

Cities sprang up in history in various civilizations quite independently one from the other. Over the past 400 years, however, we can say with some certainty that these traditions have been submerged in ‘global processes’ that have resulted from the progressive extension of European and thence Occidental culture to the furthest corners of the world. The mechanisms that are driving urbanization in the South today, however, look very different from those that drove the process in the North. Crudely speaking, urbanization in the Occident was accompanied—or driven—by a simultaneous process of the reduction in the demand for rural labour (increasing efficiency of farming methods) and demand for urban labour from the process of industrialization and the growth of accompanying services. With few exceptions—notably the ‘Asian Tigers’ and the Yangtze and Pearl River Deltas in eastern China—current urbanization is not associated with industrialization. Here are a number of factors other than industrialization which combine to drive the process forward (Bryceson et al., 2000).

- The traditional values of subsistence amongst erstwhile peasants are being undermined by intensive exposure to the values of urban society. This is proceeding simply through primary education but accelerated though access to television and the ease, through the extension of transport systems, with which cities can be visited and seen as a potential alternative set of values. Peasants—subsistence farmers—are being encouraged to want to join!
- In any case in many regions increasing population densities reduce the amount of produce per individual per unit of land, amounting to a progressive impoverishment.
- At the same time, areas where peasants have in the past made a reasonable income from selling primary produce are also receiving less money as a consequence of consistently falling prices of such produce due to mounting international competition in a regime of free trade. This, also, is impoverishing.
- Plantations and mines in rural areas that in the past were major employers in certain
instances, are increasingly efficient—both *per se* and to compete effectively in the face of falling commodity prices—and hence require less labour; in some areas land-ownership is becoming more concentrated and plantations, whilst more variegated in what they are producing, nevertheless requiring little labour, in some cases displacing erstwhile subsistence farmers.

- In some countries civil conflict is leading to ‘internally displaced people’ (IDPs) looking for safe havens that generally means urban areas.
- ‘Natural’ disasters including drought, flood, etc. are encouraging rural populations to look for safer places to live.
- ‘Aid’ money spent in rural areas, whilst widely intended to support rural communities *in situ*, is in practice often introducing hidden incentives to flee the land.
- Increasing populations in the South are coming to depend on remittances from relatives working in the North; these are generally received in urban areas where the means to spend them is also more readily available.
- Although the numbers of urban poor are growing with the urbanization process, in most countries of the South rural poverty is more widespread such that it seems that opportunities are better in urban or urbanizing locations than in the countryside.

None of these can be said in all honesty to be positive reasons for rural populations to urbanize but all of them are contributing to urbanization as being seen to be more likely to provide better security, incomes and/or lifestyles than is available in rural areas. In fact, when analysing the growth of existing cities, immigration of rural populations is only part of the story: cities are also growing from the net internal increase in population.

The form of urbanization is, however, clearly different from that experienced in the history of the North. In a sense it is, rather, emulating the more recent spatial redistribution of population in the North without going through the progression of urbanization–suburbanization–ex-urbanization which characterized the urbanization process in the North. Villages are in some cases depopulating whilst others are growing into towns. The transport infrastructure—and cheap petroleum—are playing a key role here: new kinds of ‘villages’ are in many cases—and this is true across much of Africa, Asia and Latin America—simply strips of development along regional highways. ‘Peri-urban regions’ are particularly favoured with new forms of urbanization, with the extension of road transport out from the city into the countryside.

On the one hand, the peri-urbanization process involves the relocation of poor populations forced out of the cities by increasing densification of the cores and through eviction—active or passive—via direct or indirect economic pressures. On the other, it involves rural populations finding incomes in serving the needs of the larger regional economies including those of the old city cores and of the suburbanizing formal urban developments (middle-class suburbs, commercial and recreational facilities, industries, etc.). New peri-urban settlements in the regions around older cities are in some cases growing into enormous labyrinths of informal housing with minimal urban services.

### Urban economies of the South

It is evident that the conditions in which large sections of these urban populations are living are far from satisfactory. Most readers of this paper will be aware at a minimum of pictures of slums developing sometimes in the centres but increasingly on or beyond the periphery of cities or even in open countryside. The most recent, authoritative overview and detailed analysis of this situation is given in the UN-HABITAT bi-annual report on urbanization focusing specifically on the issue of urban slums (UN-HABITAT, 2003). The situation is, to an extent, recognized by
the international development agencies and particularly the World Bank, with ‘upgrading programmes’ and from the year 2000 the financing of the ‘Cities Alliance’ with its goal of eliminating slums by the year 2020 and, as a component of the seventh Millennium Development Goal directed to ensuring environmental sustainability: ‘to achieve significant improvement in lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020’.

It is truly an anomaly of this debate about degraded living conditions and what might be done about them that refuses to face the rather obvious problem of a lack of substantial economic bases of the growing southern cities. If we take as the starting point of our search for solutions, then surely we must ask why the local economies are weak and what might be done to strengthen them. The place we must start is by noting how it was that northern cities gained the means to create what in most cases are pleasant and efficient living conditions. Part of the answer is certainly that there was a net flow of resources from the South to the North under conditions of colonialism—and to a significant extent this is still the case! However, northern cities grew up on the basis of industrialization that provided work for the population flowing out of the countryside. Whilst initially environmental and living conditions in the industrial cities of the North were worse than we see almost anywhere in the South today, in time the density of urban industrial economies produced the financial resources with which the municipalities were able to make improvements in housing and infrastructure.

Indeed, it was assumed in the halcyon days of development, with the establishment of the United Nations, the World Bank and the whole machinery of ‘development aid’ after the Second World War, that in time the southern countries would also industrialize and that, as in the North, the means would be there to produce livable cities. When we look back over the theories of development of the 1940s and 1950s, we see that it was realized that this would not be a straightforward process, entailing a ‘cultural revolution’ to create a different set of attitudes necessary to accumulate capital and to plan and implement the industrialization and urbanization processes. However, there was a firm belief that this would happen and that the development agencies were there to make it happen.

In my essay published a year ago in this journal (Atkinson, 2004a), I went into a little detail on the reasons why industrialization is not proceeding in the South today and so will not repeat the arguments here in anything but outline. Essentially, the globalization of the production system has been accompanied by a rapidly growing productivity that means that almost everything needed by humanity is produced by decreasing numbers of people. In general, the global production system has decreasing numbers of jobs to offer but, in its over-productivity, still looks for new markets. ‘Exploitation’ that once meant long and arduous working hours and conditions for vast populations now turns to the question of: how can we find consumers? Modern media are certainly able, as discussed above, to seduce peoples who over untold previous generations only wanted a piece of land to farm, to now want to participate in the consumer society. Urbanization is thus driven more by the desire to live a modern life than that there is work to be done. But the fact that industrialization is not happening has doleful consequences. On the one hand, whilst the poor manage to scrape enough of an income to buy soft drinks, ice cream and cigarettes for which the profits flow back to the industrialized countries, there are no resources with which to build decent houses and to provide sanitation and other basic urban services.

Small elites live modern lifestyles and build cities to suit their needs. However, most of what they consume is imported, making little demand for local labour. In a sense the bulk of the urban populations have no functional ties to the city. Employment is sought to gain the money necessary to buy the means to live. However, competition for relatively few jobs—in Africa and much of Latin America only 10% of job seekers can find ‘formal’
employment—drives down the wages to a point where the resulting work is tantamount to slavery or where the only possibility is to become involved in the vicarious activities of the ‘informal economy’ where incomes are overwhelmingly pitiful.

This lack of functional involvement with the city amounts to a disempowerment at many levels. This is not only a matter of having neither assets nor income. It is also a matter of having no skills to offer that might contribute to improved urban conditions. This is not because the poor are unable or unwilling to engage and to learn but simply that nobody with the authority and the means is willing to engage them in something where there would be an incentive to learn and which would start to build the machinery of a local economy that would produce an acceptable—and eventually a pleasant—urban environment.

Whilst it seems that there is reason enough on humanitarian grounds and with regard simply to the problematic of creating livable cities to stop here to look for solutions. However, it is also necessary to be aware that there is a growing urgency with regard to the unsustainability of these arrangements that also needs to be addressed. Here one cannot avoid referring to the increasing dependence of the global economic system on non-renewable fossil fuels. It was always known that fossil fuels are not limitless and it was thus presumed that some time in the future renewable resources would be developed and become available to take over once decline of fossil fuel production set in. It is becoming increasingly evident that whilst demand for fossil fuels continues upwards (IEA, 2003, 2004)—with continued growth in the ‘industrialized’ countries joined by phenomenal growth of demand in Asia (Setiyawan et al., 1996)—the day when declining resources result in an inability to satisfy the demand is reducing to a matter of decades—without much sign of any revolution in the supply of renewable energy resources.

Discourse and politics of ‘sustainability’ has in recent years focused attention on global warming and such developing disasters as sea-level rise that will encroach on coastal areas in some cases drowning whole cities. Whilst this and other issues of sustainability should not be ignored, the root problem lies in fossil fuel depletion. We can see how the global restructuring of production processes relies on increasing energy used in the production machinery and also to transport materials and goods around the world. We can see how ‘modern’ consumption lifestyles—above all the use of cars and growing air travel—greatly increase per-capita energy consumption. Worse still, the food production and distribution system—which in the quite recent past was a net source of energy—is increasingly reliant on non-renewable energy inputs, having in the US case reached a situation where nine out of ten energy units of food ‘on the table’ are non-renewable inputs to boost productivity, to transport, process and distribute the food. Even in the poorest countries, fossil fuel use has been systematically insinuating itself into many facets of the life process.

Over the coming decades, either gradually, year by year, or in one or a series of more severe shocks, the price of energy will rise, sending its effects right through the production system. Changes will take place—perhaps dramatic reversal of much of the economic globalization process—and consumers at all levels will perceive this as a matter of impoverishment, not only because the price of luxuries will rise but more problematically, purchasing power will fall with respect to essentials. For the poor, there is little margin even now and as the reduction in energy bites: it is difficult to imagine on what scale the ensuing tragedy will be.12 There is an enormous amount of wishful thinking that something will save the day but empirical analysis is bringing this scenario increasingly into focus as future reality.

In looking for solutions, we might start from obvious problems of the need for those with wealth and power to revive a sense of
responsibility for the welfare of the urban citizenry as a whole and to take action on that basis—as a moral cause. But we cannot avoid seeing the ideological context within which they operate—and also the ideological and political pressure that emanates from the North in the form of neo-liberal doctrine and current international economic management rules. Thus before returning to the question creating more livable cities, it is necessary to consider steps to the creation of local economies that will produce the means to build such cities.

Local economic development: where do things stand?

The first question to be asked when looking for solutions to the problems laid out so far in this essay is: are authorities responsible for development—either at national or international level—aware of what is going on and if so what are they doing about it? The immediate answer is that, with the rather serious exception of a systematic ignoring of the looming ‘energy crisis’, there is a dawning awareness and also some initiatives that are deemed to be moving in the direction of countering the problems. Arguably the International Labour Office’s recent report of the social dimensions of globalization (ILO, 2004) is at the cutting edge of understanding amongst international agencies. Here the problems are well identified without yet, however, presenting anything like a comprehensive approach to combating them.

On the other hand, many agencies including the World Bank but particularly the ILO in conjunction with the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) and with Italian government finance (Cattanacci, 2000) and also the GTZ (German technical co-operation) have been undertaking small programmes and projects concerned with local economic development and we need to look a little closer at these to see whether they are truly the start of a turnaround in international development thinking and action. This is done here by focusing on a programme in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan that has been financed by the World Bank and bilateral agencies including the Italian and German governments explicitly aimed at combating the ill-effects of structural adjustment (Taher, 2000, p. 4).

The genesis of the Jordanian local economic development programme can be traced to the ‘Gulf War’ of 1990 which was the cause of substantial disruption of economies throughout the region. In the Jordanian case, some 30,000 Jordanians who had been employed in Iraq lost their jobs. At the same time important trade links with Iraq were lost. The loss of remittances from this workforce plus their addition to the already slack labour market gave rise not only to a national economic crisis but also a sudden rise in unemployment and with it poverty.

A Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) was agreed between the Government of Jordan and the World Bank (1993–1998) and adopted as a framework for economic relief. Although initially leading to positive economic growth, the measures implemented also led to the continued growth of poverty especially amongst the refugee and rural population. As a response to this the Government of Jordan approached the World Bank and other donors to formulate a programme to focus attention on the economic needs of the poor and to find means to reduce the incidence of poverty. The result was the development of the Social Productivity Programme (SPP) (MOPIC, 1998).

This was formulated under three overarching goals: to make an immediate and visible impact on the living conditions of the poor through the development of infrastructure; to make an immediate impact on the incomes of the poor to lift them out of poverty; and to assist the poor to obtain productive employment and therewith sustainable incomes. The programme came into action in 1998 and comprised a number of components: the national welfare fund and employment training programmes would be overhauled and augmented, a national scheme for micro-
finance would be introduced and infrastructure investments would be made in urban areas. In itself it was not obvious how these would add up to a strategy for local economic development, but at the same time it was decided to finance a number of pilot projects that would integrate the various components in a single location and make investments in social enterprises. It is these upon which the following analysis focuses attention.

Five communities were selected covering all parts of the country as pilot areas, three rural settlements, one an agricultural community on the edge of a larger town and one in the centre of the capital city Amman. These were selected for their variety and because of the level of poverty and need to augment incomes through employment. In fact in all but one of the communities, large national non-governmental organizations were already undertaking some support programmes and so the pilot project became an additional activity on top of ongoing initiatives.

The programme was highly sensitive to the need to involve whole communities from the outset in planning and implementation. Thus in all cases, a community enquiry was initiated to identify local concerns and to make a preliminary assessment of what economic enterprises might be viable and also fit with local human and physical resources. Once narrowed down, feasibility studies were carried out to check whether enterprises identified would in practice be viable and in general to define what these should be and how they should operate. In all but one case, co-operatives were established, involving the communities in ownership and providing some capital in that members had to buy their way in. The Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation provided capital and a number of enterprises were constructed and brought into operation. These included a local irrigation system, a number of dairies producing cheese and other milk products, manufacture of cloth goods on indigenous patterns and a tourist centre.

As the enterprises got under way, various problems became evident with respect to the possibilities of this strategy relieving poverty and perhaps being the start of the reconstruction of local economies. Social enterprises of the sort brought into being by this programme find it difficult to survive in a world of professional entrepreneurialism which provides similar goods on a larger scale without the encumbrance of social decision-making. The decision was thus to continue external support for the enterprises for 10 years beyond the initial project period. Furthermore, it was evident that, whilst there are openings for new small enterprises that can survive, it is not at all evident that these could do any more than fill small niches. In other words they are not, in a world of mass production and supermarkets, obviously the start of a re-localization of the economy unless something is done to inhibit the progress of larger enterprises and protect the local economies from competition of these larger enterprises.

Before the SPP was complete and evaluated this was augmented through the introduction of the Enhanced Productivity Programme (EPP) with the intention of providing more coherent steering of local economic development from the Governorates and also setting up training and advice units for new small enterprises. The pilot project approach was also extended to a much larger number of communities in the form of ‘village clusters’. Although these ideas might be deemed to be in the right direction, they still did not address the more strategic issue of the ongoing concentration of the economy in the hands of large enterprises including transnational corporations and their local partners. Whatever local entrepreneurial activity is sparked by this initiative, there is so far no recognition of the poor survival rate of small enterprises and the way that this results from the larger dynamic of national and global economic development outlined above.

**Rebuilding local economies**

It is a major contention of this paper that if ‘participatory economic development
processes’, such as in the Jordanian case described above, are to make a significant impact then they will have to do this via a strong focus on the economic dimensions of the growth of poverty and related degraded living environments. On the other side, we might conjecture that as the rise in energy prices—already discernible—becomes steeper, the forces of globalization will wane and communities and cities will be forced back upon their own devices. Processes of disempowerment brought about by globalization have brought disorientation and undermined the confidence to learn and to take initiative and we might expect this process to now turn around, like the changing of the tide.

It is a strange anomaly that is in part a question of tradition that urban planners pay little attention to the way in which urban economies work even though, prima facie, the health of the urban economy says much about the health of settlements as a whole. Even more anomalous is the way in which the World Bank and with it other development organizations largely fail to address urban poverty issues as a function of failing urban economies and certainly fail to carry out any strategic critique of the current structure of economic development. Well perhaps this is being disingenuous, the fact being that the tacit—indeed often active—support given by the Development organizations to Big Capital includes an understanding that the strategy of capital should not be questioned and hence focus on economic development should focus on the small scale and hence avoid competition or in any way critique of what in reality are their masters.

Behind this we can surmise lies, at the same time, a refusal to look critically at the lifestyle of urban elites—and even middle classes—who have no desire for the light to be shone upon their priorities and the way they want to live their lives. Thus in the North participatory planning processes are tolerated at the margins as long as they ask no important economic questions and in the South as long as they focus on charity work amongst the poor. It is necessary to be clear about how these processes have been contained, that it is necessary to break the bounds in which they are contained and, in the current jargon, to ‘mainstream’ participatory local planning such as to take genuine responsibility for the current and future health of human settlements.

Perhaps we need to recall Chairman Mao Tse Tung’s approach to creating a consensus for change, in the first instance assessing with whom we can start the process (Mao, 1957 [1926]). This was realistic in understanding that it will not be possible to appeal to some ‘general public’ on the basis of ‘common sense’ that points out the unfairness and unsustainability of what is happening around us. It is a matter of extending the ‘stakeholder analyses’ to a deeper understanding of the necessity to work in the interests of a multiplicity of groups, understanding the ways that these operate within themselves and how an approach to change might appeal in different ways to different groups.

The advertising world has taught us—in a negative way—that we cannot rely on rational explanation to appeal to interests but must become involved in creating engaging images, in our case not simply of the badness of what is happening but of the goodness of the future one is trying to promote both in aesthetic terms and in terms of serving interests. This is the semiotic dimension of the project and although the following paragraphs set out a rational process of organization along the lines of conventional PAR, LA2115 etc., the semiotic dimension must be utilized in any attempt to walk this path, as a powerful means of breaking down the walls between and within the fragmented social substance.

It is becoming clear not only to the economically excluded (actors in the informal economy) that the economic system is dysfunctional, but also to many entrepreneurs at the level of the small and even medium enterprise level. As these are the people who are supposed to subscribe to neo-liberalism as being in their interests, it is extremely important that they should be
amongst the first to be recruited into any project to construct an alternative approach to local economic development. However, remembering that ‘entrepreneur’ might mean many orientations depending on the nature of the business, such a recruiting process needs to be aware of, as Chairman Mao put it, distinguishing between who are our (potential) friends and who are our enemies. But the role of conviction is crucial and the battlefield here is at the level of understanding what is actually happening in the world as a prelude to joining in the project of building a new kind of world.

The process needs to be sold on grounds of rationality—sustainability and a less violent society—interest, moral and political correctness and sheer aesthetics (a nicer way of life). There is need for clarity from the outset that the local/regional economy needs to be protected from aggressive external competition and be inherently tending towards redistribution (creating work, empowering through the development of skills). There is then a series of steps in the process of constructing such an economy which were sketched in an earlier contribution to this journal (Atkinson, 2004a) and which are no more than outlined in the following two paragraphs.

A very wide spectrum of interests needs to be brought into a structured decision-making process of education and participation in decision-making as foundation for re-empowerment. The initiative must be oriented from the outset not only towards a conventional idea of the local economy (production, income and profit-earning activity) but equally to consumption patterns (lifestyles). The planning process is centrally about building economic initiative primarily to satisfy local—or sub-regional—need as explored and developed through the activities of the forum. A by-now relatively conventional ‘participatory planning process’ must be initiated with ‘local economic development’ at its centre. This will involve information collection, identification and selection of immediate and long-term initiatives involving development of skills and strategies on how the initiatives will be financed.

Self-education of the local population is crucial. This will mean building local self-consciousness and new forms of local culture that choose selectively from tradition but are prepared to forge new cultural features as an essential approach to breaking down walls between social fragments and dissolving the inward-looking ethos of clientalist structures. This will focus on ‘detoxification’ against the aggressive advertising and sales of externally produced products and services. Local media must be developed or captured and a scepticism of the importance and status of externally provided messages built up. Inevitably this will come to confront those who are privileged in terms of ownership of local resources and the exercise of power and the means that will need to be developed to diffuse and co-opt these elements.

Of course such a local process will not proceed without influence also on legal and political structures well beyond the sub-regional boundaries. Local and sub-regional fora need to exchange experiences and where they find problems resulting from laws, structures or influences at a regional or national level, should join to combat these to recapture their own powers to decide. Obvious targets from the outset are national laws favouring national and transnational businesses (everything from tax breaks and subsidies to legal frameworks).

This must come into conflict with rules accepted by governments in the framework of international trade law as administered by the World Trade Organization. Regions adopting this paradigm will need national—and eventually international—organs to influence policies and the development of laws at these levels. This will not happen, however, unless there is a firm understanding from the outset of the dysfunctionality of liberalism and unfocused (‘free’) trade relations and the need to develop a consistently co-operative and largely self-reliant regional economy.16
But although the step-by-step process set out above may seem logical as a way out of the problems we face it is in reality no small project. Just as Greek philosophy lost its way in the lee of the magnitude of the Alexandrian ambitions and triumphant progress across Asia, collapsing into a meek expression of a hopeless quest of a personal morality of asceticism, so today the scale of globalization cows us into submission to the sheer, brazen success of capitalism in conquering the world. And we are silenced in awe of the magnitude of the panorama which this presents and in consequence paralysed in the face of the catastrophe that this ‘success’ must bring in its wake.

However, the onset of the decline in energy resources and the changing structure of prices and over the coming decades biting ever deeper into the very structure of the global economy would seem to provide an increasingly solid platform on which to build local economic initiatives of these kinds. Simply if the global economy no longer provides at affordable prices then we increasingly have to refocus on how things can be done (with less energy input) at the local level—and, it is contended, rethinking what kind of consumption processes are realistic and appropriate for these circumstances. That is to say that whilst in the current postmodern, neo-liberal condition it is difficult to think or act coherently to rebuild local economies, in the coming years we may be forced to do so and therefore have to think and act more coherently.

Future urban settlements

We might think that the reconstruction of local economies, being already a very substantial move against the drift of things and already addressing the issues of growing urban poverty is enough in itself. However, we cannot stop here in our quest for a sustainable and socially healthy society: the amorphousness of megacity regions and the difficulty of defining areas to become self-reliant, the ease with which, in the absence of such definition, the sheer scale of the areas involved and the problems which they face are liable quickly to lead to loss of direction and thence to defeat. Perhaps we are already witnessing this in the diminishing of enthusiasm for Local Agenda processes. The processes aimed at local economic reconstruction should thus be seen as the start of a larger process, lending a sense of going somewhere that then needs to be utilized to ask the question: going where?

At the outset of this essay, some space was given over to affirming not only that it is, in theory, possible to plan the distribution and structure of human settlements but that history shows us times and places where this has been effectively done. Societies have collectively decided that they wish to organize their settlements in a particular way to serve their needs and have gone about thinking through how best to do this and then putting it into practice. We are in great need of a shift in our collective consciousness that will escape from the fatalism—the liquid modernity of today (Bauman, 2000)—and take hold of the means to determine how our future will be organized.

The procedure sketched above for reconstructing local economies will inevitably ask questions about what is meant by ‘region’ and needs, in each case, to come to some meaningful conclusion. There are socio-political approaches to answering this and then there are ecological approaches. The ‘bioregional movement’ (Atkinson, 1992) has attempted to incorporate these into a new vision of culture that goes back through history: how did our region obtain the resources needed by its people and how did they organize themselves to live sustainably with this resource base? Although this may be one facet to be taken into consideration, in many regions of the world, the configuration of settlements and the uses of the environment are far, far away from their historic configuration and starting from today cannot be thought of in any way a march back through time, even if this were genuinely desirable. This does not mean that this
dimension should be entirely abandoned: we do need to look back critically at our history, particularly with respect to possibilities of living sustainably within our region, wherever it happens to be.

A second line of investigation must be to recognize that in the past much thought has been given to ‘ideal’ ways of organizing our communities. Utopia may be out of fashion and derided as being ‘no place’ because it is either unreachable or worse is authoritarian. There is a huge literature particularly generated by the ‘cold war’ that asserts the impossibility of positive Utopias. The idea of Utopia—the proactive design of the world we want to live in—can be construed as a logical opposite to the fatalistic idea and practice of liberalism and this is indeed a characteristic well-explored by many at the level of political practice, of ideas and philosophy (Kateb, 1963; Goodwin and Taylor, 1982).

Utopian thinking has an exceedingly rich history in Occidental culture (Manuel and Manuel, 1979) that does not have parallels in any other culture. It is clear that this is one facet of the Christian apocalyptic and the idea of progress that has evolved out of this and it contains the potential to escape from the increasingly problematic future into which our current fatalistic ‘post-modern condition’ is leading us. We can look in two ways at a world that progresses, that changes from one year to the next: we should be able to—in the framework of science—predict the future and this, indeed, was the force that supported socialism throughout the 20th century: the Marxist conviction that we know that the future will yield an egalitarian society. The collapse of communism threw this belief into deep question which is precisely the foundation of the force with which liberal fatalism has come to dominate the present era.

But the other interpretation of the idea of progress is that we can and must take the future into our own hands and make it the way we want it to be. It is this interpretation that is urgently needed to be grasped and activated if we are to overcome the vast problems created by the current drift of social irresponsibility and insecurity and the unsustainable—we should say in the medium term simply unrealistic—(ab)use of resources that is associated with present-day lifestyle aspirations. The drift towards what, at the outset of this essay, is termed ‘urbanization’ is clearly part—indeed a fatal part—of the problematic. This is not to say that urban living is inherently bad or unsustainable but that the way in which it is proceeding at the present time certainly is.

So efforts to re-localize economies must progress to discussions about the way in which the economy, including consumption patterns, should be organized in their ecological and geographical context to best contribute to overcoming social fragmentation. Utopians would refer to the creation of egalitarian, solidaristic societies where the reasons for current escalating violence and conflict are eliminated and the possibilities for cooperation as a basis for effective social decision-making in the interests of present and future generations are realized. Critical review of models drawn from the history of Utopianism can help, and need to be revived.

But actual Utopias will be different for different societies and regions and will need to be generated in specific participatory processes of the kind outlined in the previous section of this paper. It is unlikely that there will be a return to nomadism amongst sedentary nomads, but the possibility should not be ruled out by the imposition of a single model. However, it might be speculated that urban systems, in contrast to the recent past where the majority of humanity lived in rural settlements, are in all probability the main form of settlement of the future: the technological means are available to allow for the majority to live in towns and one can envisage the social decision-making process confirming the present-day urbanization drift. That megacities will be part of this is, however, unlikely (Atkinson, 1993): there are good reasons why Utopias have usually opted for regions with networks of small and medium-sized towns and cities, self-reliant to a point appropriate to size.
Utopian thinking about future settlement patterns cannot be left to physical planners as happened in the 20th-century attempts of the new town movements across Europe. The creation of Utopian settlement patterns must grow out of fundamentally participatory processes of social and economic restructuring that, if and as these develop confidence in their capacities to realize more congenial and controllable social and economic arrangements at the local level, then graduate to thinking about the physical structure of settlement pattern in the particular ecological and resource setting. This becomes the model for the ‘urban and regional planning’ of tomorrow, Utopian as ever, but grounded in new social processes aimed at transforming the structure and orientation of social and economic process.

Notes

1 The term ‘sustainability’—and its equivalent in other European languages—has been so thoroughly misused in recent years to assert that whatever one wants to do is labelled ‘sustainable’, such that it is difficult to continue employing it without incurring serious misunderstanding. Unfortunately no clearer alternative lies readily to hand and we will attempt later in the paper to clarify what is meant here by the term.

2 Bauman (1988) speaks of intellectual endeavour in post-modern society as experiencing a ‘status crisis’ resulting from the way that the consumer society has usurped their role as providers of “an authoritative solution to the questions of cognitive truth, moral judgement and aesthetic taste”. This role is now played by the commercial media and behind them powerful enterprises in their quest for profit.

3 Leo Marx (1964) indicates via historical analysis that whilst today Rousseau is seen as the exponent, even the inventor, of this notion, he was in actuality doing no more than recapitulating an ancient intellectual tradition.


5 Warner’s (1962) meticulous study of the growth of the ‘streetcar suburbs’ of Boston in the last two decades of the 19th century illustrates the point. However, by the end of the 19th century there were few cities of any size anywhere in the world that did not possess trams and European cities were everywhere facilitated in their growth by this means of transport (Meller, 2001).

6 Clawson (1971, p. 34) presents graphs for the cities of Cleveland, Boston and St Louis, indicating the universality of this phenomenon in the USA.

7 With the marginal exception of the ‘compact city’ debate—see Jenks et al. (1996), Williams et al. (2000) and Jenks and Burgess (2001).

8 The following paragraphs are derived from Morris (1994).

9 As Sir Mortimer Wheeler put it (cited in Morris, 1994, p. 33): “the high quality of sanitary arrangements at Mohenjo-daro could well be envied in many parts of the world today”.

10 Atkinson (2001, 2004a) analysed in detail the European ideological roots and Occidental practice of the extension of power that gave us present-day urbanization processes; this is therefore not repeated here.

11 The essays in Agarwala and Singh (1958) set out the range of debates that took place at that time.

12 Colin Campbell, an ex-executive of the Shell corporation and founder of ‘Peak-Oil’, a non-governmental organization dedicated to alerting the world to the imminent end of cheap oil (www.peakoil.com), recently interviewed by the Neue Zürcher Zeitung, focused attention on the links between cheap oil and food production, indicating that, as oil prices rise, all attention will need to be focused on the impacts to the food production and distribution system to minimize what are likely to be any how catastrophic consequences that will probably unfold over—in his opinion—already the next decade.


14 The following paragraphs are derived from Atkinson (2004b).

15 Participatory Action Research initiated by the International Labour Organization in the 1960s and Local Agenda (now Action) 21, being the local version of Agenda 21 approved in the UN Summit on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

16 These ideas are not isolated but relate to a broader debate that can be accessed in the first instance via the website of ‘PareCon’ (participatory economy) at www.parecon.org. See also Albert (2004).

17 And set out in greater detail in Atkinson (2004a).

18 The critique of the possibility of Utopia is particularly associated with Karl Popper (1945).

References


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