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Circumstantial Awareness - the Ethical Reality of Place in Society

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Have you looked in a mirror recently? Is that really you? Well, yes and no. Yes, in that what you see is recognisable, but no, it is not you in that it is a reflection – not the real you. For better or worse, there is only one of you, and the image in the mirror is reversed, so as anyone who has tried to tie a bow-tie or zip up a dress relying on a mirror will know, co-ordination of action based on a reversed image is tricky. You are no longer working with the real thing but its opposite; a version of reality – in this example, an inversion. It is counter-intuitive. Reality is still there but changed; reality and an impression of reality co-existing. The irony is that only others can see you as you really are, though you may argue with that.

Reality is often too close to focus on; we need a little perspective – some context, whether in space (orientation) or time (cognition). Optical illusions work, and can only work, when context is removed and our eye deceives our brain because it is at a loss to signal whether what is visible is real or unreal. Sometimes this causes rapid alternating between the two as eye and brain struggle to agree.

News is said to be history in the making – its current tense. Construction may be the hear-and-now of spatial development, but in order for us to grasp what creative cities are truly about requires us to lose immediacy and gain contextual awareness. This enables us to see things for what they really are, not just an impression, because understanding is based on relationships of subject to context, both in space and time. We need points of reference, notably measuring what we are about to know against what we already know; the new is categorised and calibrated against the familiar. We are habitual, intuitive, spontaneous and usually subconscious classifiers – an innate intuition for self-preservation or grabbing the opportunity. How then do we react to the stimuli of the new: should the adrenalin flow in excitement or prepare us for fight, flight, or fright?

‘In the beginning...’ The three words that open the book of Genesis are probably the most recognisable in the world. For many believers they are a statement of pure fact, truth; for other believers they are an allegory, intended to reduce profound truth to a level people can accept if not understand, bridging the gap between pure knowledge and belief – faith. Theology is the means of exploring this spiritual world; philosophy is its secular counterpart, exploring the meaning of existence. They share a common desire to understand reality, how we experience it, how we exist, and therefore inform how we should live. They diverge once hypothesis distils into their respective versions of reality and behaviour. In his deeply questioning book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirzig succinctly sums up how we and others can see the same thing completely differently. When his friend’s expensive new BMW motorbike developed a slight fault, Robert suggested an improvised shim. His friend was shocked at this corruption of perfection. Robert concludes, ‘he saw what a shim was, I was seeing what a shim meant’ (Pirzig 1974).

At one end of that spectrum is creation theology, the most literal interpretation of Biblical truth, representing the belief that the world around us is the product of the most miraculous single, creative act, and that being presented with this incalculable gift, humanity has been given the opportunity of adding (or detracting) through husbandry of the world’s

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resources. A version of this understanding has been posed: what if divine creativity was not a single act but a continuous process – that reality is not static but dynamic, that humanity is not working with a fixed inheritance of creation but is a co-creator? Whereas the single act of creation is described as *ex nihilo*, that is, ‘creation out of nothing’, that of continuous creation (also continued or continual creation) is akin to the world as a film strip, normally viewed running so that the individual frames are not apparent.² Creation was not an isolated act but the beginning. Though it is possible to ‘freeze-frame’ reality to understand our creative relationship with it, the film is always running.

Continuous creation is associated with Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), considered to be America's most important and original philosophical theologian. His theory predates but resonates with molecular physics and the way that all atoms are charged with pulsating energy. It also has influenced metaphysics and the Steady State theory of cosmology. Back on earth, the concept of reality being not a fixed substance (noun) but a constant creative process (an imperfect verb) puts a completely different perspective on what we do with it. ‘Place’ is no longer a subject to which creativity is applied but it is an ongoing, sustained creative energy field within which we are active participants, even catalysts.

Still questioning what existence means, but at the other end of the spectrum, is Descartes and other philosophers whose enquiry was based solely on reason, not belief. Applying the scientific discipline of rational thinking or deductive logic, in his *Discourse on the Method* he bases proof of existence on thought, not the senses (Descartes 1637). In this context, creativity is not material but cerebral, not observation but comprehension; reality is not a deception but only exists through awareness. Magritte’s painting *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. (‘This is not a pipe.’) drew attention away from the subject of the image to the fact that it was simply an image. Films like *The Truman Show* and *The Matrix* explore what we believe to be reality, because we know no different. All test our dependency ultimately on a *priori* intuition: ‘knowledge’ that cannot be verified by experience may not be true. So if creativity is manipulation of reality, and/or society’s perception of it, then being creative carries both privilege and responsibility.

Discussion of creative cities inevitably wheels out the time-honoured tradition of vision: ‘There was a new heaven and a new earth...’; ‘the new Jerusalem...’ —‘visions’, for ever since Biblical times or some would argue, even earlier, an array of ideals by visionaries have been presented to their audiences, and for their leaders then to make real. With the exception of Jerusalem (still work-in-progress according to Revelation 21:22), visions most often remain just that: unrealised utopian pure ideals – unrealised because they inherently are an elusive concept uncorrupted by the concessions of practicality, weakness, flaws and our fickleness to change our minds. Being creative would be simpler if it was a straight-line progression towards a result. However, being human, as soon as hands are set to work on the tools of realisation, the minds that inspire, inform and direct have a change of heart. Often the true reality is that we just cannot stick to something long enough to see it through without revision, refinement or change because change by itself feels like, and is in fact, a natural part of being creative.

Visions only originate with individuals: do you know of any group that simultaneously all had exactly the same bright idea? But if the visionary is a lousy communicator their vision is immediately diluted and devalued; it is diminished even before it reaches the ears of the first recipient. Visionaries are hampered by being mortal, and as visions that involve cities

² Do We Live in the Matrix? <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/do-we-live-in-the-matrix>.

have a frustrating habit of taking more than a lifetime to fully implement, the world is littered with half-implemented schemes, half-visions that ran out of steam when the visionary inconveniently died or was not re-elected, or gave up. Visionaries and their successors, even the most devoted acolytes, once they get their head round the ideas and their hands on the means, are vulnerable. The focus shifts as things develop, whether a tweak or a rethink, a developing idea or a response to new stimulus; the vision adapts and in some instances is abandoned as the inspiration that was the energy supply dries up, or circumstances change and what was once thought to be essential later loses relevance or worse still, is seen as being fundamentally ill-conceived. The wealthy can afford to demolish their own projects and start again but many cities live with the consequences of civic schemes for which the rationale of the original idea has long since been lost, and for which the cost of remedy is prohibitive.

So whether it is tying a bow tie in the mirror or an orator announcing national transformational change, somehow reality and creativity are not that straightforward. Rather than seeing creativity as visions of reality we need to recognise creativity creates versions of reality. This realisation bridges between the inspiration of the mind and the implementation of the hand in a way that values both as complementary.

Immediately apparent from this shift in mind-set is that humanity has been introduced into the equation: utopian purity is humanised by personality with all its idiosyncrasies; in other words, character. Utopian visions are unpopulated; real people do not do purity. This is why, metaphorically, we have 'mirrors' as reality-checks. This is how societies reconcile the need for purpose and self-worth with the practicalities of life. The concept of a pure vision of society may be heaven, but in the meantime people have to deal with being a little less perfect and work out their own salvation through making the best of their relationships with others and where they are in the world.

Applying this perspective explains why the European dream is not an attainable destination but a journey. A visionary society in a visionary place is not a convincing manifesto, for the purity upon which it relies gives the game away: it is not believable. The object of creativity has to be within reach; inspiration must motivate, not alienate. In a construct as complex, dynamic and indefinable as Europe, competing creative experiments abound – indeed, the chemistry of reactions is a characteristic of this multi-various socio-economic cauldron as much as its elements. What experiments will produce is almost irrelevant because the conclusion is no where in sight. A creative Europe, and therefore its creative cities, can have no business plan with a concluding outcome to be signed off as complete.

This is (or the politicians hope it is) an inclusive process in which leadership is less the preserve of an individual, government or company board but a truly democratic process, bringing with it the consequence of too many variables to predict and control. Europe is not therefore portrayed as a promised land, for there is no explicit promise, even though immigrants from developing countries hold that vision and take huge risks to reach it. Rather, at least in the current political ideology-scape, the horizons are somewhat closer: this is a journey of degree – a form of shuffling collective consensus in search of self-improvement, not abandoning the comfort of the familiar, not with the aim of substituting one reality with another, but of incremental progression at a pace governed by the steps of the slowest.

Where Europe is at any given point in time is equivalent to a freeze frame taken from a film: a brief glimpse of a volatile story in which, depending on your viewpoint, the mesmerising excitement of constant, unpredictable creativity, or the ever-present disquiet of what was reassuringly familiar yesterday, may not be quite the same tomorrow. An era of relative peace and stability may lull us into thinking Europe is comfortably at ease with itself

but a time lapse history shows the merging and de-merging of national boundaries over a thousand years is anything but.³

There are many stories of families living in central Europe who have been residents of three or more countries during their lifetime without ever moving house. Their version of reality of place is different to that of the political forces which kept moving the lines on the map. In 1968, when E. F. Schumacher, author of *Small is Beautiful*, visited St. Petersburg (then Leningrad), he could not reconcile the existence of several landmark churches with their apparent absence from his map. He was told 'living churches' were not included in maps – the reality on the ground was amended in the version of reality as represented on the map (Schumacher 1973:11). Such editing of reality is not unusual where political discomfort or the interests of security warrant licence to do so. Thus are visions of reality converted into versions of reality, deliberately or otherwise.

This is the territory of the political map-maker, but also the territory – the minefield – of the creative professional: urban designers, architects, engineers: the metaphorical bridge-builders between the here-and-now and a 'Better Place'. Their instinct is conceptual, but their language is material. In having clients, they are interpreters of the intentions of others, articulating solutions that not only meet needs but hopefully uplift the spirit. It can be the most rewarding or thankless of roles, being the fulfiller of dreams or the proverbial prophet being unwelcome in his own land. Creative professionals are intermediaries whose origins lie in societies in which individuals do not possess all the skills and resources for subsistence but must collaborate to achieve more than the sum of the parts. Creativity in that sense is not just an eternal striving for betterment but the unlocking of capacity, of social capital. A creative society is one that excels, one that overcomes constraints, rises beyond survival and finds expression, mirroring the personality of its people, finding an urge not just to meet essential needs but rise to higher things. Identity may have begun as a territorial necessity but as it developed from rivalry to co-existence it gave us the characteristics of cultural identity. Films like Friz Lang's *Metropolis* remain powerful reminders of what a characterless society would look like – an inverted purity achieved by expelling the qualities that define humanity, sustained purely as a (literally) head-down machine-like labour resource without expression or hope. The fact it was filmed in monochrome emphasises this is a one-dimensional world that was broken by the intervention of spirited emotion of the heroes, not material expediency.

The fulfilment of creative virtue, as well as its human vulnerability, was at the heart of the Renaissance and personified in Renaissance Man. The word 'renaissance' is of course not about originality – creativity from first principles, divine insight or instinctive intuition. Its etymology lies in the French 'renaître', to be reborn, reappear, rekindle. It was not a vision but a re-versioning of a cultural reality to which creative thinkers and their patrons wished to return and emulate. (The term 're-versioning' in this context is not the same as 'reversion', meaning revert, to return to a previous state, nor is it the same meaning as that used in the media whereby a previously broadcast production is updated for re-release. These terms emphasise the retrospective whereas the intention here is more akin to creative re-writing – a re-think, which has a point of reference of original source material but is comprehensively re-imagined in a new way by new creative thinkers within a new context.) This was not an act of self-indulgent nostalgia but to use historical precedent as inspiration to inject new life and meaning into society. It was therefore a bridging between the perceived values of ancient Rome (or at least its virtues if not its vices) as a reinterpretation relevant to the values of a contemporary society. All these adjectives are prefaced by 're-': the contradiction is that in

3 1,000 years of European history in time lapse: http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=890_1367106116.

striving to rediscover a lost purity of vision from an earlier age, it could never be pure, for it always would be a version of that former reality disconnected from the original context and transplanted into a new host society.

No-one would consider the renaissance a sham devoid of creativity. On the contrary, its success was in its capacity to transcend all disciplines and encompass all manifestations of civilisation. The ability of this success to be personified in the model of Renaissance Man is still with us, though just as elusive, and therefore just as admired: someone whose intellect and skill – quality of thought and ability in application – is distinguished by exemplary achievements across a comprehensive range of subjects. In a world of specialists, a world often forced by policy and legislation into silos, the personification of the spirit of the renaissance can be inspirational but also a threat to the status quo. Leon Battista Alberti (1443-1452) is often cited as the original Renaissance Man, developing universal ideals through his experience as a stonemason, painter, sculptor and theorist. In *De re ædificatoria* (On the Art of Building), he described his belief that beauty is a calculated characteristic that could be designed into a building by following certain prescribed methods, thereby challenging the boundaries between intuitive subjectivity and rational objectivity. On this premise, one could describe classicism and therefore neoclassicism as having formulaic beauty – principles upon which Alberti as both scientist and artist was trying to distil into a methodology (a practitioner's manual) for applied thinking. Though his work continues to be a cornerstone for those designing in the idiom of neoclassicism, the discipline of rigid compliance within an historical design framework was simply too constraining for successive generations in what now may be termed pre-programming of creativity, reducing it to an 'app'. Mirroring the liberties enjoyed by largely stable and peaceful global societies, especially European, creativity in spatial planning, architecture and all the applied arts abhors containment: freedom of expression in society is expressed through a desire – a perceived right – of freedom in creating new realities to represent those societies: reflecting the signs of the times. It is therefore ironic that today's data computing capabilities enable us to produce life-like visualisations of as-yet unrealised projects, and would be capable of all the calculations to assemble to true rules and proportions entire neoclassical environments, from the entasis of a column to the composed vistas through sweeping monumental colonnades. But these are visions that strike little resonance with a society more comfortable with informality, other than a backdrop to tourism brochures, advertising and wedding photographs.

Within months of the end of World War II, municipalities across England were drawing up their own visions of towns and cities, not just as post-war reconstruction, remedying damage, but exploiting pressing need as uninhibited opportunity. In many instances we now consider those proposals to be an over-reaction to the ad-hoc destruction of bombing and deprivation. Master-planning was the mantra to eradicate the hurt and insecurity of conflict and inter-war austerity with an overdue uplift of spirits by radical transformation, mostly by all-or-nothing modernism wrapped in the palatable clothes of the Beaux Arts – utopia on a grand but recognisable scale. For the professional planners and architects at least, if not quite for a weary public, it was a re-versioning of a well-defined style that had much latent, under-exploited potential. Discipline in the shape of the Beaux Arts' nod to classical planning and aesthetic formality prevailed, but was softened and supposedly updated to match the new hierarchy of a Britain once again in the ascendancy. This was not the writing of a new chapter for England in the sense of resuming and emulating overtly English antecedents: it was a deliberate decision to look forward, not back; to look out, not in. As a result the designs were unequivocally 'a sign of the times' but rarely acknowledged any

‘spirit of the place’. The reality of recent history was an uncomfortable place to be; this was not a time for subtlety of thought but boldness, of as quickly as possible putting everything associated with the past, behind. A plan for Newcastle upon Tyne, a city of over 900 years of incremental development, swept away all in its path, ignoring contours, history and the legacy of centuries, leaving only isolated landmarks such as the railway station.⁴ As the cathedral and castle of Durham are perched upon a hilly peninsular of a river, its physical constraints could not so easily be ignored or erased, but the gateway of a new civic building and the status of a dual carriageway were enough to show a clear intent especially when presented in appealing watercolour. Over-layering a new city was seen as the power of conviction; fitting in, a sign of timid weakness. This was a once-in-a-lifetime crisis and for leaders, a one-off opportunity to prove their mettle. Receptiveness to transformational change was heightened. And yet, despite the herd instinct to follow their leaders, the public’s nerve waivered and affection for what people knew overpowered the call for the new. The plan for Newcastle upon Tyne was not implemented; the dual carriageway into Durham was, though without the Beaux Arts civic buildings.

Behaviour of collective movement is what brings philosophy and its younger cousin, marketing, or rather the psychology of market manipulation, together. Both analyse how people make choices. In his landmark book of 1957, *The Hidden Persuaders*, Vance Packard lifted the lid on a taboo subject, for if the subject audience of consumers understands how they are manipulated into buying, they might think twice before doing so. The language of manipulation cannot be heard, for it is subliminal. It is communication that bypasses cognitive understanding and therefore awareness by appealing directly to the emotions to trigger a reaction resulting in purchase. The power of this is such that once initiated, even if the consumer becomes aware of what is happening, the magnetism of completing the purchase is, as the retailer would wish, irresistible. ‘In very few instances do people really know what they want, even when they say they do’ (Packard 1957:17). It is this realm – this subconscious world of incentives – which all who seek to profoundly influence the course of collective movement in society must master. Soap will only make people clean, so when a company wishes to sell an enhanced product such as skin cream, it must sell not on the basis of tangible cleanliness but the intangible promise of hope – to make women more beautiful.

Twenty years later, in his book of 1974, *Design for the Real World*, Victor Papanek refers to the ‘Kleenex culture’ in which design is both a co-conspirator in the act of persuasion but also the real villain of built-in obsolescence, ensuring reliable future market demand for replacement products to keep industry in business. This was a very different form of (and motivation for) recycling to the appeal made by Schumacher (1973) the year before in *Small is Beautiful*. Schumacher went on to apply his economics based on humanity to the developing world where attitudes had not become so entrenched, where consumption was not embedded in the cultural psyche. This was not exploitation of innocence but a *cri de cœur* while there was still time.

Twenty-first century Europe is still a largely subliminal battleground between the two opposing ideologies of consumption and conscience, fought on the high streets of its cities and in the recycling bins of its residents. Citizens may still be consumers, submitting to the allure of adverts, but somehow it is a more informed and discerning market; retailers have to do more, presenting their credentials, not just a message. Products must not just meet need

⁴ A Plan for Newcastle upon Tyne, England, 1945; <http://upcommons.upc.edu/revistes/html/2099/789/art06-1.htm>.

but exceed expectation; they must not just offer value for money but add value without compromising their impact on society and the environment – in other words, people are more circumstantially aware of the consequences of their decisions and within reason will do what they can. An overt claim of excessive conspicuous consumption will be more likely to go unheeded and even repel unless counterbalanced by some attempt at reassurance to conscience. People are still open to persuasion but they are more savvy. The subliminal world is still out there but once people know of it, they tread with caution. Schumacher has the edge: the trend is in his direction, especially among the disenfranchised young who probably have not even heard of him. Creativity is no longer therefore about meeting need but adding value.

Schumacher was swimming against the strong currents of free-for-all exponential growth in the post-war years. He therefore shifted his attention geographically to societies more open to his message still in their early formative stages of economic development (Schumacher 2011:35). His passion was not just in how the economies of society could be shaped through what we now accept as considerate sustainability (remarkably, a term almost unknown in the 1970s and not headlined in his books). He wanted decision makers to face up to the underlying moral motivations of economics – causes, not just effects. His search for reason was expounded in *'A Guide for the Perplexed'* (1977) in which he lambasted religion as a deception, and yet later in life his position changed, being accepted into the Catholic Church. His economic legacy remains strong in Africa, India and Asia, and through agencies in the UK such as the Centre for Alternative Technology and the Soil Association, but his spiritual legacy is free of geographical constraint.

Schumacher's influence on Buddhist economics is as a counterpoint to the perceived persistent addiction of the West to consumerism and the pursuit of self. In Budapest, Professor László Zsolnai is Director of the Business Ethics Center at Corvinus University, one of the oldest centres of its type in Europe. He co-founded the Buddhist Economics Research Platform between the Business Ethics Center and the East-West Research Institute of the Budapest Buddhist University. 'Ethics is one of the oldest projects of humanity and there can be no end to rethinking ethics in our economic affairs' (Zsolnai 2012). Zsolnai defines the principles of Buddhist economics as a measure of sustainability. Each human has an 'ecological footprint' that is the unit upon which resources and need are accounted for as on a balance sheet. This is termed 'earthshare' and is the average amount of ecologically productive land and sea available globally per capita. In 2005 earthshare was calculated at 1.6 hectares per person. That means the ecological footprint of the world's population exceeds the ecological capacity of the Earth by 200-250%. In other words, we would need 2-2.5 Earths to sustain our present lifestyle. But that was the average. In Western countries the intensification of use is greater, and therefore more challenging: the average earthshare for Western Europe is 5, with Denmark and Sweden higher at 7-8 and even the environmentally-conscious Netherlands scoring over twice the global average at 4. This means Western Europe is consuming resources at up to twice the global average (Zsolnai 2010). The message Zsolnai is sending out from Budapest is that revisionist Western economics cannot in itself rebalance supply and demand, that a Buddhist approach is essential to the ethical foundation upon which resources will be sustainable. Presentation of this argument pre-dated the crisis in Europe that would bring the economies of Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy, and others, to the brink of catastrophe. As Europe seemingly begins to re-stabilise, even that experience has not prompted such deep reconsideration of upon what we are building.

Historically, societies in such a crisis would look to the *'noblesse oblige'* for salvation – privilege entails responsibility: the obligation upon the nobility to sort things out. Of course

supposedly classless societies can only look to those who have acquired power by election or endeavour, otherwise a common historical alternative ensues: the revolt, which some might argue is traditionally still more effective than any latter-day *noblesse oblige*. The rise and spread of the Occupy movement is still too recent to have yet been the subject of fully objective assessment of its material results but it is a signal that uprisings no longer respect national borders; economic wellbeing, and therefore society, transcends nationality and therefore its hitherto conventional parameters and controls. Could it be that political freedom is leading not to the appointment of any form of democratically representative governance, which still preserves a form of socially unacceptable hierarchy (the 'Establishment') (Paxman 1990), but more radically, to a self-levelling dissipated autonomy of locally-sustainable units, whether regions, cities or enclaves – a shift from nationality back to ethnicity, from place-centricity to people-centricity?

Countries across Europe have national heritage collections of historical sites and buildings assembled to represent their cultural identity. In England, is this collection representative of the English people, or England, the place? Is the collection of 40-50 sites across Hungary representative of pure Hungarian culture or the legacy of tides of international influences that just happen to be within the national borders of the state of Hungary?

At the time of writing Scotland is again considering independence. 'Again' because it has tried and sometimes succeeded several times before but on those occasions was wrought with the sword and musket. The prospect of a dis-United Kingdom three hundred years after unification has stimulated some soul-searching in the normally benign English. One typically English viewpoint succeeds in being at once both profoundly rooted in historical precedent ('pre-Scottish') and profoundly *avante garde* in anticipating a trend towards disaggregation of the current nation-states of Europe. The appropriately named Tom Shakespeare, presenting a point of view for the equally appropriate organ of the BBC, has ventured a model based on the Anglo-Saxon England of A.D. 500-850, suggesting that a Europe divided into units of up to 10 million citizens is far more sustainable and prosperous than what we currently have.⁵ His thinking came not just from history but by looking over his proverbial neighbour's fence: within Europe, the Nordic countries and Switzerland, and 'across the pond', the typical size of each of the United States. This even seems to fit with Zolnai's concept. It makes for a highly relevant and intriguing argument in support of Hungary with its population of 10 million: big enough to be economically viable, small enough to be culturally identifiable. However, Shakespeare's strident argument stumbled when he considered that 'smaller' is often associated in England with what is called NIMBYism: Not In My Back Yard – a form of conservative 'small-world' prejudice against the Outside World, which perhaps is a predictable perspective from an Offshore Island. Nevertheless it provides a glimpse of an alternative world, or at least an alternative glimpse of the world we think we know. What if all European countries had the same population as Hungary? Unstoppably, we all are entering newly defined territory. Whether we like it or not the ethical foundations upon which we build will change. What were familiar boundaries a generation ago are dissolving: belief, marriage and jobs for life are no longer assumed; who we are will be redefined.

In November 2013 PriceWaterhouseCoopers published its annual review of 27 of the world's cities in a performance assessment of the infrastructure that makes them *Cities of Opportunity* (PwC 2013). Whereas Zolnai measures socio-ecological *balance*, PwC measure the conventional business indicators of *capacity* to deliver more socio-economic bonus.

⁵ A Point of View: Taking England back to the Dark Ages, Tom Shakespeare;
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-27731725>

Culture, education, transport and housing are considered, but in terms of their economic leverage. The Executive Summary opens with: ‘a city is much more than just its people, public and private buildings, energy, water, utilities and health resources; much more than its markets, parks and entertainment; and certainly more than a statistical aggregate of numbers and economic capabilities. A city represents human civilization in one of its most advanced forms. That is why the relationship between infrastructure and urban life is so deep, indivisible, and *transformative*, as it channels prosperity into social enrichment and, thus, to a much higher quality of life.’

The presumption is for growth now and in projections up to 2025. The factors of comparison between cities and over time are: demographics and urban density, economic growth and transformation, and urban wealth. The index of growth over time is not just physical and economic expansion but of progress from ‘survival’, ‘basic’ and ‘advanced’ up to the aspirational status relevant in the context of this discussion, ‘quality of life’: an enhanced lifestyle over-and-above just making ends meet. These levels of accomplishment are based on but adapted from A. H. Maslow’s classifications of social evolution, though PwC are careful to distinguish their use of them from Maslow’s. It is intended to be a reality check of net wealth and worth; a steer for where to prioritise investment. The bottom line, as they say, is straightforward GDP.

To illustrate the findings, the report contrasts two ‘mature’ cities (Los Angeles and Stockholm), two ‘legendary’ cities (Paris and Shanghai), two ‘emerging’ cities (Seoul and São Paulo), and a famous European capital (Madrid) with one of the most dynamic cities in the world today (Singapore). Of the ten over-performing cities, five are European: Berlin, London, Madrid, Paris and Stockholm, of which Berlin leads the field. The 2013 report raises two inter-related relevant questions arising from analysis of the smaller, more compact, mature cities that rank very well for infrastructure: i) do emerging cities risk becoming too large and densely populated, thus keeping them from achieving the quality of life of mature cities? Or, ii) can technology, and smart and efficient use of land, allow them to grow without sacrificing quality of life? Quality of life is defined as ‘enhancing the use of *public spaces* in order to increase community cohesion and civic identity, and guarantees the safety and security of lives and property.’ Environmental sustainability is not excluded: ‘[it] values the protection of the urban environment and natural assets while ensuring growth and seeking ways to use energy more efficiently, to minimize pressure on surrounding land and natural resources, and to minimize environmental losses by generating creative solutions to enhance the quality of the environment.’ Sadly, despite the report title and dynamic subject, this is the only reference to creativity in the 48-page Executive Summary; ethics is not mentioned at all.

The specific focus of the PwC report means it does not consider cities as organisms that have just enjoyed growth but also suffered periods of contraction or reinvention, and of course even destruction. PwC take account of the amenity value of public open space but not their *raison d’être*, which for most cities was agriculture; cities were and still are markets, even if the produce now is as much virtual as it is edible. Cities have long abandoned their reliance on agriculture but their strategic locations and infrastructure skeletons have somehow supported growth of an inconceivable nature. Until the 19th century the presumption based on historical precedent was that cities grew out of towns which had grown out of villages; the nuclear model of a centralised core radiating out along transport routes was unquestioned. Those with defensive walls breached them and just kept expanding outwards, reducing density perhaps, or assimilating outlying villages into neighbourhood satellites. As with any organism, sometimes growth hits problems and wilts, is redirected, or must respond to other stimuli and changing circumstances, even recovery from the trauma of destruction. But as

PwC has shown, growth now is not a measurement of scale or even population but productivity. In his paper on the forgotten modernism of cities, Boštjan Bugarič describes how the motto 'Form follows Function' has been superseded by 'Form follows Finance', where imbalance arises from single sector domination, whether tourism (an economy dependent upon a transient non-residential market) or business (whose market may be virtual, even completely remote from where the office is located) (Bugarič 2006). His point is that the visible, accessible city inherited and in the collective ownership of its people is a commodity just as vulnerable to market fluctuations and exploitation as private property; market-driven rather than civil creativity. Citing Ljubljana (though the example could be almost anywhere in Europe), Aleksander Jakoš in the same paper laments how this precipitated the demise of centrality in contemporary cities as their cores became too expensive to inhabit or trade from, pushing indigenous urban activity out into a surrounding ring before sometimes rebalancing once values had readjusted. The lament of Bugarič and Jakoš is that cities are not in control of their own identity or destiny, for the creative forces are circumstantial, not of their own making. PwC would argue that cities which are thriving exploit available opportunity; they cannot synthesise it *ex nihilo*.

That was already the case in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The dynamics of cities took on a completely new dimension with industrialisation, accelerating change and intensifying the tensions between the new 'nobility' of manufacturers and the workforces needed for manufacturing. Urban growth was no longer evolutionary but revolutionary, but it was still driven in response to opportunity. Conscience was a quaint indulgence; production was literally all-consuming – of time, labour, space and materials. This was competitive creativity. And yet the surge of rapid development did yield its philanthropists and prophets, those who could not contemplate growth at any cost. In England, Octavia Hill was motivated to do something about social reform for the masses that were the fuel of the industrial revolution. Her greatest (but not only) achievement was in 1895 establishing the National Trust, not as a conservation body but as an amenity for the poorest urban dwellers to enjoy the 'green lungs' of England. It would grow to become the largest of its kind in the world.

Three years later, Ebenezer Howard published his *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, a vision of a utopian city in which ordinary people could enjoy a healthier life through less pressured use of land. It began as a very English preoccupation with the garden. Even though it was not entirely capable of being implemented in its purest form, Letchworth, the first garden-city, begun in 1903 by Howard himself, proved the concept could translate into a workable reality. Others followed, but perhaps more remarkably was that the model could adapt to contexts outside England. As soon as 1908, the prime minister of Hungary, Sándor Wekerle, had begun what would become known as the Wekerle Estate in the 14th district of Budapest. This was no suburb in the sense understood today but an initiative to hold true to the principles of Howard. That this was for state employees is as remarkable as the quality of environment; the Transylvanian idiom of the architecture, guided by the architect Károly Kós, was for rural workers acclimatising to work in the city. A century later, this is still a much prized and essentially intact ensemble. It retains sufficient legibility of the original vision but is an enduring, liveable, and adaptable practical application of it. Having been built for a 'transplanted community' of migrant workers, it is interesting to compare it with White City in Tel Aviv, whose genes lie in the visions of that other inspirational urban planner, Patrick Geddes, but whose realisation was in the hands of Bauhaus architects from Germany. White City was almost contemporary with Wekerle in its conception as a 'garden-city' but Geddes was appointed sometime later and only completed his plan by 1929. Unlike Wekerle, which co-ordinated masterplan and architecture, the long gestation for White City meant Geddes had

no hand in the design of the buildings, only the layout; the buildings followed later in the hands of the Bauhaus architects. Circumstances meant both White City and Wekerle had a lot to prove in breaking with tradition, and both relied on guidelines to maintain integrity in their identity. The centenary of Tel Aviv was celebrated with protection of over a quarter of the original 4,000 buildings, augmenting the conservation area status and the inscription of World Heritage Site status in 2003.

These examples, from Octavia Hill to Tel Aviv, were not motivated by Romanticism; far from it. There was no desire to relive historicism or indulge in sentimentality, rather the very sober reality of first meeting pressing social need and then, in PwC's terms, aspiring to a quality of life through sustained (though not necessarily sustainable) growth; creativity initiated by ethics, even if not necessarily sustained by ethics. The National Trust is not in the business of creating places but its ethos is to create beneficial experiences of them. Geddes had a fundamental problem with Howard's movement, if not his motives: garden-cities were clean-sheet creativity, tracing over a blank landscape with an idealism that ignored any sense of place for which Geddes himself was so instrumental. Untamed, such dispossessed visions are a dangerous, placeless imposition. In an interview, David Pinder, author of *Visions of the City: Utopianism, Power and Politics in Twentieth-Century Urbanism*, cites Jane Jacobs, author of the influential book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, in which she attacked the utopian schemes of Howard, Le Corbusier and the City Beautiful Movement. She saw them as 'having a disastrous influence on planning practice at the time, she argued they failed to recognize the intricate order and pattern of daily life in the city streets. They ignored or suppressed that as they sought to impose their own abstract conceptualizations of order' (Pinder 2005). The same could be said of the New Town Movement in Britain, initiated to accelerate housing provision in the post-war years. In 2014, The UK government reactivated the concept of garden cities as a proposed solution to the escalating housing shortage that cannot be met through 'brown field' redevelopment of redundant land and outdated buildings. The wave of such comprehensive transformational urban growth has waned, stifled by starvation of state funding, perhaps until the next crisis. Wren's vision for a London in the wake of its devastating fire of 1666 was never realised but it was a glimpse into what might have been.⁶ Would it have been a travesty to begin again, or did extraordinary circumstances warrant exceptional solutions? Wren was not given that opportunity but it leaves London with one of the most profound 'what if's' in its history.

Romanticism, an emotional reaction against the constraints of rationalisation, was the antithesis of vision and original thought and has been the counterpoint to innovative creativity throughout the last two hundred years. Looking longingly over the shoulder for reassurance in a form of nostalgic, even naïve familiarity, was an opposing force of attraction to the waves of trail-blazers seeking to explore new fields of inspiration. Its Promised Land inhabited dreams uncontaminated by compromise; almost by definition, it was and had to be unreal – an escape from reality rather than a version of it. Society needs its visionaries but it also needs its interpreters to translate purity into practicality, distant horizons into waymarked paths, realisation of concept into substance; in a sense, the spiritual into the secular. Ironically, the reaction against uninhibited Romanticism, which in itself was a reaction, helped to reset the net balance of excesses, perspective and retrospective, enriching all forms of development with humanity, including urban design.

⁶ Wren's London; <http://londontopia.net/culture/art/great-london-art-sir-christopher-wrens-full-vision-fire-ravaged-london/>; Wren's London; <http://www.microcolour.com/uk006.htm>.

This tempering of ideology may not have been a concerted movement but a symptom of shifts in attitude in society – the product of comfortable stability in an era of peace, and less state funding and appetite for *grande projects*. In the 25 years since the changes of 1989, most central European cities including Budapest have benefitted from transformational investment in their public realm and infrastructure in which the pace of investment has been matched with quality of design and materials. Evidence shows that economic development on a large scale must begin with changing perceptions and engendering market confidence. Conviction begins not with aesthetics but intangible risk management and tangible infrastructure: more than ever spatial planning must now be the product of the tangible and the intangible; it must be a more subtle, refined, intelligent, accountable and inclusive process.

Take two examples in which assimilation has been achieved: one in a rural environment, the other, urban, blurring the boundaries of what is a building and what is its context; of the tangible and intangible. They are distillations of values; a chronology of realities co-existing. The visitor centre for the Giant's Causeway World Heritage Site in Northern Ireland is an extension of the geological feature visitors come to see.⁷ Set within an open landscape, where does the building end and its environment begin? Visitors can move around, in and over the 'building' which is not so much a building as remodelled ground. It is not invisible but it is not a statement. Compare it to the Norwegian National Opera House in Oslo.⁸ This too can be experienced as remodelled environment, not an object; here too, visitors can move around, in and over the 'building'. Neither building has a 'front', 'sides' or 'back'; they defy conventional definitions of 'inside' and 'outside', of public space. They redefine 'public building' in new terms of understanding and accessibility that reflect the open society they serve.

The exponential growth in online 'trading' – retailing, banking, business, the contact networks upon which social media relationships are conducted – now covers most aspects that enable society to function. The made-for-television direct appeals to consumers of the 1950s revealed by Vance Packard are a world away from the sophisticated free access multi-media that the internet has opened up. It bypasses intermediaries (governments, broadcasters and even the retailers themselves) and the editorial filtering they have exercised. This is not a fulfilment of democratic ideals, for there is no accountable governance. Nor is it anarchy, for there is order, even if the rate of development is faster than its controls. It is outside the conventional terms of reference we have grown up with. It is a reality with guidelines, not rules; a world without substance or territory. The concept of the shop window as the physical stage of retail communication now feels rather timid. Retailers and those trading in physical goods have been forced to rethink their relationship with the buyer, evacuating from the high street. But for those dealing in information, the internet has removed all physical constraints. It is the fulfilment of Descartes' existence through reason alone in being knowledge disembodied from the individual and the collective body of society. But it is also uncannily close to Jonathan Edwards' description of a dynamic, energised world in a constant state of being recreated.

However, it is not yet proven to be a sustainable world. It consumes energy and therefore relies on it for its very existence. That lifeline can and has been turned off by nation states uneasy about the loss of control of both the medium and its content. As for the data

⁷ Giant's Causeway visitor centre; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-24032248>.

⁸ Norwegian National Opera House, Oslo; <http://snohetta.com/project/42-norwegian-national-opera-and-ballet>

created by the internet, its ‘harvest’, even that is no longer required to be static, held in one place. We are all increasingly encouraged to abandon our own storage in favour of The Cloud, a form of global data infrastructure that can redeploy resources dynamically to where access and demand are needed. Physical location is inconsequential provided the infrastructure is accessible. It is about as close to an out-of-body experience most people will have.

It is entirely appropriate that this is dubbed virtual reality, for it is a form of reality that has much in common with the analogy of the mirror with which we started. It is not a replacement for physical reality but co-exists as its parallel. It raises, however, the fundamental question of dependency by citizens on any infrastructure: is their existence reliant upon its existence? It echoes campaigns by the Situationists in the 1960s about the ability of the individual and their role in society to exist without commodities as the currency of capitalism – protesting even to the idea that consumers are currency.⁹ The collapse of infrastructure and dependency was a theme explored by art within the movement, and through various books and films of the time such as *A Clockwork Orange* and *1984*. Such visions of dystopia were extreme versions of ‘what if’ scenarios, but the idea of the plug being pulled on the internet has not yet been explored artistically.

David Pinder brings us back to earth: whatever we are doing, we still need to deal with the reality of existing. He relates how protesting about the unfair dependency of society was poetically summed up in the student riots in Paris in 1968 by the phrase ‘*sous les pavés, la plage*’ (‘under the cobblestones, the beach’). This ‘brings out, so well, the sense that other worlds are not only possible but also close by – that they’re within reach, and that through action and struggle they may be realized. That geographical imagination is invaluable for thinking about cities as fields of possibility...’ (Pinder 2005). In this phrase the close proximity of ‘reality’ and ‘dream’ was only separated by the cobblestones in the hands of the protesters. Pinder is looking beyond social revolt and the materialism of urbanism to the relationship between the two, between ethics and empowerment. He highlights that one-off transient events can reverberate through time, acquiring long-lasting effects. It is as if society has a need to regularly ignite new fires to see if one will take hold and burn on, illuminating new possibilities. The historic or cultural environment is our springboard, our inspiration; it is embodied energy from which the chemical reaction of creativity is ignited.

A lesson from this is that our perception of a society depending on permanence is outdated, and that we need to change our expectation from permanence to transience. The volatility of the internet and even the speed of change in the physical world is now so characterised by perpetual transience that the concept of reality as fixed is no longer in itself, real. Creativity is not focussed on the permanence of outcomes but the experience of process; the journey of constant renewal being more important than a destination in which creativity has run its course and become redundant. This has yielded some interesting responses.

In Vancouver, the concept of being in a permanent state of renewal has been translated into an appropriate vision based on sustainability. Pressure to clear older properties is counterbalanced by a resources premium that aims to minimise the waste of material and embodied significance: the older and more characterful a property proposed for demolition, the higher the percentage of its materials must be recycled – up to 90%. Renewal by

⁹ The Situationists; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Situationist_International.

replacement alone is seen as loss of continuity of identity as well as a waste; ‘We become a city with no stories. That really grieves me.’¹⁰

An opposing response to disenfranchisement is to accelerate dependency through ‘smart cities’ in which the development of capacity for connectivity is said to unlock freedom for the individual. These are inescapably technology-dependent environments and, depending on your viewpoint, result in increased subservient dependency on the infrastructure, or, open up greater devolved control of localised systems to the individual. This is very much a debate of the moment as the capability of cities to perform competitively to achieve the targets outlined in the PwC report referred to earlier will depend on innovation. The question is whether innovation is the route to creativity, or the sustainability espoused by Vancouver, or whether it is possible – even essential – to be both.

The message is that creative cities need to be both, co-existing, like you and your reflection and the many other examples of complimentary versions of reality cited above. As more and more people migrate into urban settlements to be close to essential services, the gateway of internet infrastructure has become more essential than other utilities, not just for business but for the domestic and leisure services that also depend on it. But people are human and want choices and opportunities to explore themselves, express themselves and be independent. Infrastructure and independence are both forms of life support that define a city in the twenty-first century. The urban environment, with its history and character and foibles and buzz, is the context of life. Living without being somewhere is being nowhere, and people abhor that as much as an uninhabitable pure utopia. The intellect of the virtual technological environment cannot survive without the body of the physical environment. Creative cities are the lightening conductor between virtual creativity and local reality.

Jonathan Edwards somehow glimpsed the resonance of a world alive with energy and relentless creativity. Buddhist economics advocates personal and economic restraint to rebalance consumption with supply to reprioritise happiness. Of all the performance indicators referred to above, ‘earthshare’ is the physical equivalent to the individual’s virtual data allocation of the Cloud. How we have used or misused physical resources, economic performance, environmental sustainability and ethical values is the story of society and how we got to where we are now. It is in the genes of every settlement, from villages to capital cities, which bare testimony, are witness to all these traits, for cities (and other settlements) are not in themselves creative, but the crucible of creativity. A creative city should not claim centre-stage but be the environment in which its citizens can be creative – a place in which the germination of the new is natural; a way of life. Creative cities, therefore, are not by definition what they are (created), or as a place to be (existence), but that they are ‘doing’ (perpetual current tense) places. The coffee houses of Vienna or Paris were not in themselves creative, but they provided the forum for creative thinking and expression.

Alberti, Howard, Geddes, Zsolnai, PwC... all have presented versions of realities expressed in response to awareness of their own circumstances and conscience. But for creativity to thrive, whether in cities, towns or anywhere that society gathers, this is no longer enough. A world of instant global communication, sharing of ideas and peer review is a world less suited to individual visionaries and more to the synergy of collective action. Creativity must be a continuous process that never reaches a conclusion; we must accept perpetual

¹⁰ Vancouver;

<http://www.theprovince.com/Heritage+watchdog+points+loss+entire+neighbourhoods+Vancouver+West+Side/10050119/story.html>

transience as normal, not the pursuit of permanence. It must be allowed to have the kinetic motion of the film strip, not frozen and deprived of life-energy as a still frame. It cannot exist in a vacuum, starved of the resources to fuel it and the people to benefit from it. Therefore, creative environments, cities and societies must redefine their role as hosts, possessing above all else the capacity to be the medium between virtual intellect and reality of place.

So, in conclusion, open your eyes. Do not just look at what things are but begin to see what things mean. Better still, in the words of Morpheus in *The Matrix*, free your mind.

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