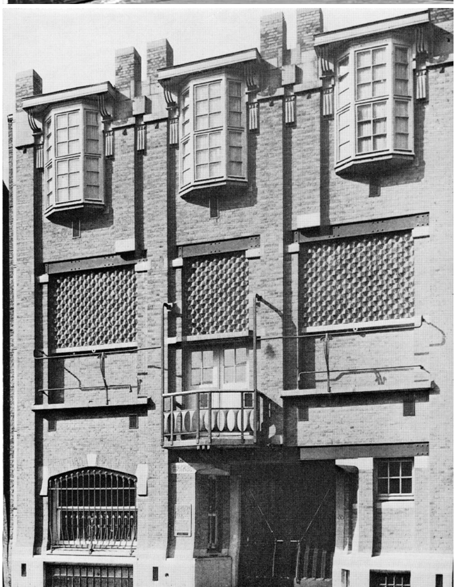

LC 1927 Plainex; www.fondationlecorbusier.
Pompe Dr. Van Neck.

On CNU, The Thirty-Year War, and the Environment

MICHAEL DENNIS[1]

Abstract: Dan Solomon writes beautifully; clever, sharp, pithy, but never snide. His prose is so deliciously accessible, however, that the full force and power of his underlying polemic can sometimes be overlooked. Such is especially the case, I believe, with his essay: “CNU: The Thirty-Year War—New Urbanism and the Academy” (Chapter 17 in *Housing and the City: Love Versus Hope)*. Almost hidden within this essay is a very important urban argument deserving special attention. Solomon’s argument, however, is cloaked in an entertaining introductory discussion of CNU versus the Academy, and only emerges about half-way through the essay. In the beginning, he toys with the Academy and CNU like a cat with two mice: the Academy for narcissistically chasing only anti-urban, one-off, goofy buildings which can’t make urbanism; and CNU for devolving into the production of dreary fabric without inventive architecture. He then posits “A Third Way,” where urban fabric is enlivened by inventive civic architecture embedded in dense urban fabric. This requires real cities, however, and Solomon eloquently cites examples in Rome and San Francisco, thus challenging both CNU and the Academy to develop urbanity rather than suburbs and narcissistic architecture. The current environmental crisis injects unavoidable urgency into Solomon’s argument because cities are the most efficient form of human habitation by consuming less energy and producing less carbon on a per capita basis.

Introduction

Dan Solomon writes beautifully; clever, sharp, pithy, but never snide. His prose is so deliciously accessible, however, that the full force and power of his underlying polemic can sometimes be overlooked. Such is especially the case, I believe, with his essay: “CNU: The Thirty-Year War – New Urbanism and the Academy” (Chapter 17 in *Housing and the City: Love Versus Hope)*. Almost hidden within this essay is a very important urban argument deserving special attention. Solomon’s argument,

1. Michael Dennis, Former Director of the MIT SMarchS Urbanism Program, Founder of Michael Dennis & Associates, *Architecture, Urban Design, and Campus Planning* in Boston, and author of *Court & Garden: From the French Hôtel to the City of Modern Architecture*, MIT Press, 1986. email: Mdennis@michaeldennis.com.

however, is cloaked in an entertaining introductory discussion of CNU versus the Academy, and only emerges about half-way through the essay. In the beginning, he toys with the Academy and CNU like a cat with two mice: the Academy for narcissistically chasing only anti-urban, one-off, goofy buildings which can't make urbanism; and CNU for devolving into the production of dreary fabric without inventive architecture. He then posits "A Third Way," where urban fabric is enlivened by inventive civic architecture embedded in dense urban fabric. This requires real cities, however, and Solomon eloquently cites examples in Rome and San Francisco, thus challenging both CNU and the Academy to develop urbanity rather than suburbs and narcissistic architecture.

The War: Fabric vs. Monument

Solomon introduces the "War" by stating that the academy and most contemporary architects believe in: "Object fetishism, the city be damned," and that "New Urbanism does provide a place, but a limited and condescending place, for the object obsessions and formal preoccupations of architects. It is the idea of *fabric* and *monument*. In this conception, the normative buildings of the city are an anonymous tapestry that defines and frames a few special sites for buildings of special importance – the monuments." Solomon goes on to say: "… the fabric/monument conceit is simplistic, condescending to architects, and not a very useful model for the various interactions between architecture and city form. A big problem with the New Urbanist fabric/monument idea is the attitude toward city fabric as something normative, ordinary and requiring a lessor architectural intelligence than the creation of monuments …

This overly simplistic conception of fabric and monument has a fairly recent pedigree. It was born in the heat of the late-twentieth-century battle for the recovery of the city from the urban degradation of modernist architecture. This was a context where arguments that were too subtle or complex would not win the day. Simplistic battle-cries were required. Otherwise, historically, the conception never appeared in practice—except perhaps in the diagrammatic classical Greek city where only finely crafted temples were exalted above a rather banal urban background.

Buildings of the Third Kind

Solomon continues: "There is, however, a whole category of masterworks which one can call *Buildings of the Third Kind*. In these works, architects give expression and honor to special places, while simultaneously reinforcing the weave of city fabric that defines its streets and public spaces." He then gives a very focused, eloquent description of Rome and Francesco Borromini's San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane and the Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco as examples. This is a powerful argument, one that is at once a critique of New Urbanism and a subtle description of great cities.

It is true that for most of human history cities and towns have consisted of architectural monuments and urban fabric – temples and towns—but most civic buildings were in fact embedded within the urban fabric. In Classical Greece the most sacred temples were often located on the acropolis, separate from the town. In Hellenistic Greek towns and Roman towns, however, the temples were usually within the town and the number of civic buildings within the town fabric increased. For centuries this was the pattern: the traditional city – European cities like Rome, Paris, Florence, Bordeaux, etc. – has always been a dense agglomeration of contiguous buildings and narrow streets with only very few important civic buildings articulated as free-standing icons. Most civic buildings were embedded in the urban fabric. But even private buildings could simultaneously be assertive works of architecture, however, as well as supportive parts of the urban fabric; e.g., Florence and Venice. In the traditional city, style, or architectural language, could vary while still maintaining the city as long as there was hegemony of urbanism over architecture. Unlike today, architects were literate in both architecture and urbanism.

The Enlightenment Revolution: Free-standing Icons and the Birth of the Suburb

A condition of reciprocity between architecture and urban fabric remained until approximately the mid-eighteenth century, when important Western institutions began to be expressed as articulate architectural monuments – freestanding icons, or narrative architecture.

In both France and America, the preferred system of habitation became the one-family house in a romantic landscape. Thomas Jefferson saw this as an ideal model for an emerging agrarian democracy, and "Elm Street" and the American town were born. Frederick Law Olmsted, the great landscape architect and the father of American suburbia, believed that urban central business districts were necessary for commerce, but that people should live in the landscape outside the urban center.

The Modernist City

This Neoclassical change in sensibility reemerged after the frenzy of nineteenth-century city building as the spatial and philosophical underpinning of modern architecture and town planning. Essentially, the city disappeared; architecture became ever more assertive and violent; and the private realm of architecture finally achieved hegemony over the public realm of the city. As more bizarre architecture replaced urban fabric (e.g., Hudson Yards in Manhattan) sprawl replaced suburbia. The city, which had always been *urban*, turned inside-out. Thus, in addition to *suburban sprawl*, we can now speak of *urban sprawl* (think countless new Chinese cities). During this process, society lost its sense of community and urbanity; staggering amounts of finite resources were consumed; and our planet became so polluted that the damage may be irreversible.

New Urbanism and the American Town

It was against this background that New Urbanism emerged in the late-twentieth century. Intended as an antidote to suburban sprawl, New Urbanism espoused a return to the sublime principles of the classic *American Town*, thus connecting it inextricably to Enlightenment ideals. In other words, New Urbanism was never really *urban* in the city sense. It did reform ideas of the suburbs; it gradually caught on with developers and politicians; and its principles are those of traditional cities and towns. Nevertheless, most of its successes – some quite beautiful – have been as subdivisions or parts of larger suburban areas; e.g., Kentlands and Lakelands as part of Gaithersburg, Maryland (a confusing mess of a commuter suburb). New Urbanist planning still focuses primarily on subdivisions rather than cities and relies heavily on single-family houses, low building heights, wide streets, and automobile-oriented compositions. In other words, it is a market driven improvement of suburbia.

Beyond the Status Quo: A New Environmental Reality

Contemporary environmental issues are challenging the status quo, however. Data indicate that in the beginning of the twenty-first century, our planet has passed into an irreversible environmental crisis – one that, without intervention, could result in the extermination of human life within the not-too-distant future. The most catastrophic outcome may still be averted, but it will be difficult, and life will be radically different than that of the twentieth century. Achieving this will require that we leap-frog over the status quo, speculate, and plan for life fifty or more years into the future. Oddly, environmental issues may do more to positively transform our cities and towns than any polemic or treatise. Historically, the defensive need for city walls created dense, compact urban environments. The current environmental crisis could provide contemporary impetus for similarly beautiful, livable cities.

At this point I am well-aware that Dan Solomon will likely consider the rest of these observations uninteresting, unnecessary, and irritating. But he should listen, as they reinforce and expand the principles of his work as the most urban of the New Urbanists.

Population and Lifestyle

The size and lifestyle of our human population are the drivers of the current environmental dilemma through production of food and materials, consumption of renewable and non-renewable resources, and waste and pollution. As the world continues to urbanize (over 50 percent of the world's population now live in cities); as population increases (it is predicted to increase from 6 billion to 9 billion by 2050); as the world's resources diminish (especially petroleum); and as we continue to poison the planet by continuing to burn fossil fuels; it will become imperative to reconsider human habitation including architecture and its relationship to the city.

In contrast to the global condition, two-thirds (68%) of the population of the United States live in the suburbs or rural areas. Only one-third (32%) live in the city. On a per capita basis, non-city dwellers consume a disproportionate quantity of energy and produce an equally disproportionate quantity of carbon. The population of the United States is predicted to grow by ca. 121,000,000 by the year 2100, or approximately 60 cities the size of Paris, France. (Not a bad thought.) If this increased growth is achieved at the current suburban/urban proportion (68:32), the ecologic results will be catastrophic.

The results of our complex, modern lifestyle of consumption are no longer unseen, but visible, including: toxic pollution of the food chain and water system, melting ice and snow caps, rising sea level, acid seas, deforestation, desertification, fresh water loss, soil erosion and loss, and species extinction. Of all of the results of our lifestyle, however, global warming is by far the most devastating. We can live without oil, but we cannot live on an excessively warm planet.

The concrete evidence of the past and the present may be described and argued with some degree of clarity, but predictions about the future almost always prove to be quite wrong. Even if the future cannot be predicted, however, there are facts that can be known and trends that can be identified with some degree of confidence. For example, the environmental and economic trends identified in *The Limits of Growth* in 1972 have proven to have tracked more or less as predicted over the last forty years, and point toward unprecedented environmental and cultural challenges that threaten not only the quality of life on our planet but possibly even the continuity of planetary life. Predictions of the future are not required, but an acknowledgment of the facts of the present is. As Aldus Huxley has stated: "Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored."

Excessive consumption of both renewable and nonrenewable resources, population growth, waste, and pollution (including carbon) are crucial facts of our time. They are exacerbated by our non-urban lifestyle and have ominous implications for our future. At best, radical change will be required, and at worst, if we do not change, the near future could make the centuries of disintegration of the Roman Empire seem like a pleasant interlude.

The political excuse for non-action is always economic. But remediation is more expensive than prevention, and extinction is even cheaper. If we continue what we are doing, the forces we have unleashed will purge the Earth of the problem – we humans. Even if it takes a millennium or more for the Earth to come back to equilibrium this is an insignificant period in the timeline of our planet.

Urbanism and the Environment

What do environmental issues have to do with architecture and urbanism? Almost everything. Our whole culture is based on the idea of limitless resources and continuous growth, and we have become so accustomed to the idea that we have forgotten that we live on a finite planet. We need to use fewer resources, rely less on infrastructure, and create less pollution. This means living smaller, closer, denser, simpler – *more urban*. We need to (again) conceive architecture and urbanism in these terms.

Urbanism is crucial to a solution of environmental problems as it is the most efficient form of inhabitation with the smallest ecological and carbon footprint on a per capita basis. The form of our cities and buildings are the solution, not the problem. We have several thousand years of excellent precedents to draw upon. But more than a century of destructive urban behavior has produced contemporary architectural and urban conventions that are impotent for twenty-first-century issues, much less for producing quality urban environments. And, when conventions are inadequate, principles become necessary.

Urbanism vs. Urbanization

Urban life may indeed be the most sustainable form of habitation, but rapid and increasing urbanization, primarily in India, South America, and China, does not suggest a livable sustainable urban future, nor does continued horizontal sprawl in the United States. These forms of habitation may technically be cities, or mega-cities, but they are not urban, because the civic realm is missing. They are simply social warehouses, the product of expediency, automobiles, and other aspects of the status quo. But the status quo of today is not very likely to be the status quo thirty years from now. Indeed, if identifiable facts and trends materialize, the near future will be radically different from present-day reality. Thus, environmental prudence and good urban practice should conspire to produce sustainable and livable twenty-first-century cities.

More of the status quo will not produce beautiful cities; it will preclude them. If recent trends toward urbanism are to continue, as they should, architectural and town planning practice must change radically. The combination of excessive vehicular circulation and detached buildings have together done more to produce bad urban environments than any other factors – by far. Conversely, the combination of dense contiguous buildings and streets as narrow as possible would do more to produce good urban environments than any other factor.

Oddly, after all the theorizing, everyone knows which are the good cities: Paris, Rome, Bordeaux, Bath, Venice, Barcelona. All are compact, with continuous fabric, tight streets, and fabulous spaces. There is communal life because there is a civic realm. They are also among the world's most sustainable cities on a per-capita basis.

The basic form guidelines for good urbanism are simple: *dense, contiguous urban buildings forming modestly sized blocks; streets as narrow as possible, designed primarily for people, not cars (or diesel buses); a pattern of plazas or squares of moderate size; neighborhood and civic parks and gardens; mixed-use, walkable neighborhoods; a legible civic structure of public spaces and buildings; and efficient public transportation systems.*

These are all basic principles of New Urbanism. They simply need to be applied to an urbanism of the twenty-first century; i.e., real cities, not suburbs, and not as the simplistic concept of monument and fabric, but as more complex urban fabric outlined so cogently by Dan Solomon in his chapter on "The Thirty-Year War."