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Perspectives

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Green Visions: A Dialogue

Brantz: One place to start thinking about visions of the green city might be *Metropolis*, Fritz Lang's 1927 expressionist film about love and labor staged in a grossly segregated world. While poor workers toil in the artificial environment of industrial machine rooms below, the wealthy owners frolic in the bucolic eternal gardens above. Led by Maria, the workers struggle for their liberation as the air is literally taken away from them. *Metropolis* depicts the workers' fight for liberation as the struggle for access to the green spaces above ground, because these spaces offer fresh air and the delights of leisure in an open garden. Lang's airy garden on top of the metropolis serves as the ultimate promise for liberation and equality, which he ties to the idea of a "green" (more naturalized) city.

> **Sharma:** I think Lang's film is a fantastic place to start the discussion, because it uses spatial metaphors to dramatize the underlying political economy of the green city. One could call Lang's vision a "vertical" axis, where privilege is a product of exploitation; where the pleasure garden is built literally on top of factories entombed in underground caverns. This is very powerful visual rhetoric because it reminds us that leisure and luxury are often produced by the work of others. But it isn't just class exploitation that makes Lang's metaphorical garden possible. The historical and spatial practices analyzed by, for example, David Harvey are also central to understanding why some people live in gardens while others live in caves.
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> Roughly half a century prior to *Metropolis*, for example, politicians and planners fundamentally transformed cities like London, Paris, Brussels, and even Berlin. Boulevards were widened, parks and public spaces were extravagantly funded, and monumental architecture celebrated the transformational capacity of Western powers. These metropolitan centers were making claims to global status, and they did so in part by rationalizing, beautifying, and pacifying the urban core. And how was this transformation of urban environments achieved? By pushing dirty manufactories like chemical plants, metal works, and slaughterhouses outside the city. Here we have a "horizontal" axis, where the beautiful urban core depends on the dirty and disordered periphery. And it is important to recognize that this horizontal axis spans

US Steel Works. Photo by Paul Sequeira for the Environmental Protection Agency; currently located in the National Archives, Maryland, [public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

the globe. After all, the vast wealth of Euro-American metropoles—the wealth that financed public works, parks, and other public spaces—was substantially based on the reliable flow of goods and resources from colonial worlds. I would go so far as to suggest that metropolitan gardens (to lean once more upon Lang) have always depended on displacing pollution, poverty, and disorder to the peripheries.

Brantz: Your notion of a horizontal axis also raises another perspective on the urban periphery, namely the foundation of new types of cities proposed in contrast to existing metropoles. In Great Britain at the turn of the twentieth century, for instance, Ebenezer Howard initiated the garden city model that today is perhaps the best-known example of these types of cities. On the other side of the Atlantic, Frank Lloyd Wright's hypothetical Broadacre City, or Greenbelt near Washington, DC—which actually was built—represent other concepts developed during the New Deal in the 1930s. What all of these new models of "green cities" had in common is a critique of existing metropoles as overcrowded, inhumane living environments. In their stead, urban reformers planned for much smaller, more egalitarian, and more cooperative living arrangements embedded

in extensive green spaces in peripheral locations. By replacing capitalist ownership with a cooperative model, Howard's garden cities presented another version of the horizontal reframing of the political economy of green cities you mentioned above. Howard also raised the very important notion of scale when he suggested that an individual garden city should be limited to about 32,000 inhabitants in order to remain, what we might now call, sustainable. Of course, his notion of "sustainable" was more aligned with the hygiene movement, thus identifying a good living environment with health, cleanliness, and the prevention of overcrowding. At the same time, these green city ideas were rather self-referential. While they were usually envisioned in reference to existing metropolitan centers like London, Berlin, Paris, or New York, their creators tended to ignore these cities' dependence on larger global, imperial, or colonial networks. In that sense, they replicated Lang's vertical axis of exploitation on a horizontal plane as they were narrowing the scale of their utopian green visions.

> **Sharma:** Garden cities are so interesting because, as you say, they illustrate the tension between discourses *about* cities, and cities as phenomena that exist in place and time. As you point out, scale is central to the way that Howard imagines the garden city, which was supposed to be small enough to foster social bonds between residents—to make them "stakeholders" in their own health and well-being. Garden cities were implicitly about creating quasi-autonomous enclaves. But of course, they were always dependent on larger, even global, networks, whether for provisioning, work, or trade, among others. I also think that garden cities and green cities share some important characteristics: in particular, the linkages they draw between green spaces, quality of life issues, and healthfulness. At least for me, green cities raise some of the same fundamental questions as garden cities do: Is it possible for everyone to live in a garden city? Can all cities be green? I think the answer is probably no.
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> It makes me wonder whether and to what extent the green city depends on the same exploitative logics as the colonial metropole did one hundred years ago. When thinking about green cities, we need to compare discourses about green space, sustainability, inclusivity, etc. against the actual outcomes. In this way, it's possible to see whether green cities are (intentionally or unintentionally) displacing undesirable outcomes like poverty, pollution, and inequality to the peripheries. Colonial metropoles and garden cities both offer useful historical precedents for analyzing this tension between discourse and practice.

Swimming beach in proximity to industry, Calumet Park, Illinois. Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant, photo by David Riecks [public domain], via the Environmental Protection Agency.

Brantz: Yes, we certainly need to think about the concept of green cities from a global perspective, and this points us to one of the problems that persists in many green city discourses today: many current ideas of green cities are still premised on notions of inequality and exploitation. The betterment of living conditions in one place is often built upon the worsening of (environmental, working, living) conditions elsewhere in the world. We need to critically evaluate to what extent, for instance, the establishment of green spaces in (Western) postindustrial landscapes is dependent on the fact that much industrial production has moved to other parts of the world. Western exports of trash to less developed regions of the world are another drastic example. I think that in order to grapple with these problems, we ought to shift the conceptual foundations of "green cities." For one, we should move away from the notion of "green" because it tends to privilege green spaces, i.e., parks, which only make up a fraction of urban environmental concerns. Now, one might argue that "green" is supposed to stand for all kinds of environmental features including water, the air, and whatever goes on below ground. However, as we have learned about human society, it is paramount for every politically conscious intellectual enterprise to openly acknowledge diversity in order to unmask power differentials, hidden inequalities, and hegemonic agendas. Thus, rather than using the term "green," we might want

to think of the "colorful city." That would broaden our horizon to the "blue" and "brown" environments, and to the wide varieties of animals that populate the urban realm. Even more importantly, it would also incorporate the built environment and the multi-ethnicity of people who act upon these environments. In addition to explicitly broadening our notion of "green," we also need to reconsider the term "city." I would argue that as long as we think about "green cities," we tend to think in terms of localized and geographically and politically bounded entities or "containers."

Sharma: I think that's exactly right and, unfortunately, this is not just a theoretical challenge but an administrative one. Green city initiatives, regardless of who proposes them, only move forward when municipal authorities sanction plans and allocate personnel, resources, etc. It makes sense, then, that these initiatives focus on "the city" as a territorially bounded entity; after all, municipal authorities are paid to think about the people who live within the city limits.

But if sustainability and equal access constitute the core of a genuinely "green" city, as I think they do, then the city as a *territorially bounded* entity is actually part of the problem. Let me offer just one example here. Beginning in the late 1990s, Chicago began to invest substantially in transportation infrastructure, cleaning up brownfield sites and moving dirty manufacturing out of the city. This has been great for many of the city's residents: better air quality, new green and public spaces. At the same time, Chicago's authorities have extremely limited legal, administrative, and financial capacity to shape industrial or environmental practices just outside the city limits—for example, in Gary, Indiana. Highly polluting industries move across the state border; city residents buy cheap gas across the state border; and those living across the border—literally steps away from the Chicago city limits—experience the impacts of those displacements. Chicago residents, though, are also negatively affected. Industrial and human waste from outside city limits regularly flows back into the city through Lake Michigan; noxious fumes from refineries and coal plants in Gary affect air quality in Chicago. It is also worth noting that the Chicago residents who are most exposed to these cross-border effects are the poor black and Latino communities who live in Chicago's far south and southwest neighborhoods. All of this is to say that, in situations where the territorial city is the key metric, the net impacts of green city initiatives are questionable. If the green city idea is to realize its potential, then transborder strategies need to be a starting point, and not an afterthought.

Brantz: In his book *La révolution urbaine* (*The Urban Revolution*), Henri Lefebvre argued that urbanization had reached a point where it no longer made sense to think about individual cities but rather about the urban as an overarching phenomenon. That was in 1970. Today half of the human population lives in cities, and the environmental consequences of urban living are felt across the globe. To grasp these consequences, we need to think beyond the boundaries of individual cities. Cities have far-reaching ecological footprints and a tremendous impact on global water and air pollution, as well as on climate change. To address the interactive effects of ecological processes and urban living, we must investigate both the large-scale effects of the urban, and the specific actions that cities take. Looking at both in conjunction, we might be able to articulate the concrete steps necessary to bring about more sustainable living environments for all.

Sharma: These efforts to create city-actor networks are quite exciting, and it will be interesting to see how they develop in the near future. And I absolutely agree that a more interactive approach is important if green city discourse is to realize its potential—not just to build more livable, inclusive, and sustainable cities, but also to create positive impacts that extend *beyond* the city limits. But in trying to create a more interactive framework, I would start with a very basic observation about governance: local governments are deliberative and contested bodies, which means that the green city idea is always being "sold" to political opponents, funding agencies, corporate sponsors, and others. The good news is that the idea is pretty easy to sell, because city managers want the things that come with being recognized as a green city: federal and foundation money, and good publicity that can be used to appeal to the young, educated, prosperous, and progressive demographic that every city wants to attract.

The bad news is that selling the green city idea to public and private partners also transforms the idea itself. The hard work of making cities more sustainable tends to become subordinated to other goals that have a more visible payoff. Instead of making difficult or politically controversial decisions that limit consumer choice, threaten financial penalties, or levy taxes, municipal leaders talk about bike lanes, open-air events, farm-to-table restaurants, and so on. The problem, of course, is once the green city idea moves into the competitive space where strategic goals are set: that's when money is allocated, interest groups are canvassed, and "sustainability," "inclusiveness," and "equality" tend to lose out. In a contested political process where cities compete for jobs, population, and resources, the green city idea is packaged in

ways that emphasize urban quality of life issues that do not necessarily coincide with global sustainability concerns as, for example, laid out in the Sustainable Development Goals.

I say all of this not to condemn widely celebrated green cities like Copenhagen, Portland, Vancouver, and others, but simply to highlight the fact that all of these cities—and others that aspire to be like them—are at least as focused on prosperity and growth as they are on sustainability and inclusiveness. And this creates a tension between the green city in practice and our shared aspiration towards global sustainability.

Brantz: But that is precisely the challenge—in the end, a concept that applies only to the rich will not really help in our collective struggle against climate change. If the green city operates in the same way as the bucolic gardens in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, then it only fosters the further exploitation of humans, animals, and the natural world. If we really want to disrupt this vicious circle, we need to unravel the political, economic, and social premises that lead to a simple greenwashing of cities. Thinking of the "colorfully urban" rather than the green city might be less marketable as a promising symbol within a growth economy, but it could lead to a more complex understanding and more inclusive approach towards a sustainable future for the globe.

References

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