The Open City

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The cities everyone wants to live in should be clean and safe, possess efficient public services, be supported by a dynamic economy, provide cultural stimulation, and also do their best to heal society's divisions of race, class, and ethnicity. These are not the cities we live in.

Cities fail on all these counts due to government policies, irreparable social ills, and economic forces beyond local control. The city is not its own master. Still, something has gone wrong, radically wrong, in our conception of what a city itself should be. Perhaps those nice words -- clean, safe, efficient, dynamic – are not enough in themselves to confront critically our masters.

In this talk, I'd like to propose we look at the city in a more embracing way. Currently, we make cities into closed systems. To make them better, we should make them into open systems. We need to applying ideas about open systems currently animating the sciences to animate our understanding of the city. More, in an open city, whatever virtues of efficiency, safety, or sociability people achieve, they achieve by virtue of their own agency. But just because a city brings together people who differ by class, ethnicity, religion, or sexual preference, in an open system, the city is to a degree incoherent. Dissonance marks the open way of life more than coherence, yet it is a dissonance for which people take ownership.

I can't, without keeping you into the small hours of the morning, do justice to this

argument, but I'll try to highlight its essential features.

I. Closed

Let me begin with a paradox. The art of designing cities declined drastically in the middle of the 20th century. That's a paradox because today's planner has an arsenal of technological tools -- from lighting to bridging and tunneling to materials for buildings -- which urbanists even a hundred years ago could not begin to imagine: we have more resources to use than in the past, but resources we don't use very creatively.

This paradox can be traced to the over-determination both of the city's visual forms and its social functions. The technologies which make possible experiment have been subordinated to a regime of power which wants order and control.   A classic example is Corbusier's 'Plan Voisin' in the mid 1920's for Paris. The architect conceived of replacing a large swath of the historic centre of Paris with uniform, X shaped buildings; public life on the ground plane of the street would be eliminated; the use of all buildings would be coordinated by a single master plan. Not only is Corbusier's architecture a kind of industrial manufacture of buildings. He has tried in the 'Plan Voisin' to destroy just that element which, as we will see, creates open-ness in a city. He got rid of life on the ground plane; instead, people live and work in isolation, higher up.

This dystopia became reality in various ways. The Plan's building-type shaped public housing from Chicago to Moscow, housing estates which came to resemble warehouses for the poor. Corbusier's intended destruction of vibrant street life was

realized in suburban growth for the middles classes, with the replacement of high streets by monofunction shopping malls, by gated communities, by schools and hospitals built as isolated campuses. The proliferation of zoning regulations in the 20th Century is unprecedented in the history of urban design, and this proliferation of rules and bureaucratic regulations has disabled local innovation and growth, frozen the city in time.

The result of over-determination is another paradox, namely that these frozen cities decay much more quickly than urban fabric inherited from the past. As uses change, buildings have to be replaced, since fixed form-function relations make them so difficult to adapt; the average life-span of new public housing in Britain is now forty years; the average life-span of new skyscrapers in New York is thirty-five years. The over-specification of form and function makes the modern urban environment a brittle place.

It might seem that the Brittle City would in fact stimulate urban growth, the new now more rapidly sweeping away the old, but the facts argue against this view. In the United States, people flee decaying suburbs rather than re-invest in them; in Britain and on the Continent, as in America, "renewing" the inner city most often means displacing the people who have lived there before. But this brittleness tells us something by contrast about growth of a more open sort. It is more complicated than simple replacement of what existed before; it requires a dialogue between past and present forms, a dialogue which is amorphous and often juxtaposes present and past without any modulation. In this rather dissonant way, growth in an open city is a matter of

evolution rather than erasure.

In addition to over-determination, a closed system has two further attributes: equilibrium and integration. These two attributes are usually seen as virtues, in government policies across the board, not just in urban planning. A programme should be balanced; everything should cohere! But urban planning shows why in fact equilibrium and integration, just like over-determination, can be destruction.

The closed system ruled by equilibrium derives from a pre-Keynesian idea of how markets work. It supposes something like a bottom line in which income and expenses are equaled out. In state planning, information feed-back loops and internal markets are meant to insure that programs do not "over-commit," do not "suck resources into a black hole" -- such is the language of recent reforms of the health service, familiar again to urban planners in the ways infrastructure resources for transport get allocated. The limits on doing any one thing really well are set by the fear of neglecting other tasks. In a closed system, a little bit of everything happens all at once. Which is a recipe for low-quality.

Second, a closed system is meant to be integrated. Ideally, every part of the system has a place in an overall design; the consequence of that ideal is to reject, to vomit out, experiences which stick out because they are contestatory or disorienting; things that "don't fit" are diminished in value. The emphasis on integration puts an obvious bar on experiment; as the inventor of the computer icon, John Seely Brown, once remarked, every technological advance poses at the moment of its birth a threat of

disruption and disfunction to a larger system. The same threatening exceptions occur in the urban environment, threats which modern city planning has tried to forestall by accumulating a mountain of rules defining historical, architectural, economic, and social context -- "context" being a polite but potent word in repressing anything that doesn't fit in, context insuring that nothing sticks out, offends, or challenges.

These three attributes of a closed system -- formal coherence, equilibrium and integration -- bedevil planners of education or planners as much as planners of cities; the closed system betrays the 20th Century bureaucrat's horror of disorder. Put this way, we seem to be on an intellectual terrain inhabited by liberals like Karl Popper, who famously wrote about open and closed societies, or even up on the dizzy libertarian mountains where Ayn Rand and other extremists dwelled. But I think there is an entirely different way to think about open-ness; the social contrast to the closed system is not the free market, nor is the alternative to the Brittle City is a place ruled by developers.

May I say here the cunning of neo-liberalism in general, and of Thatcherism in particular, is to speak the language of freedom whilst manipulating closed bureaucratic systems for private gain by an elite. Equally, in my experience as a planner, those developers in London, as in New York, who complain most loudly about zoning restrictions are all to adept in using these rules at the expense of communities.   The contrast to the closed system lies in a different kind of *social* system, not in brute private enterprise -- a system which is open socially to different voices who attend to one another, rather who each do their own thing in isolation.

II. Open

To the scientist, open systems are familiar companions. Chance events, mutating forms, elements which cannot be homogenized or are not interchangeable – all these disparate phenomena of the mathematical and/or natural world can none-the-less form a pattern, and that assemblage is what we mean by an open system. In time, an open system can be non-linear, and within that frame range from path-dependency to the patterns of chance studied by Giorgy Markov. In space, an open system resembles a chemical colloid rather than a compound. The most familiar and most magnificent open system familiar to all of us is Charles Darwin's version of evolution, which combines elements of chance mutation, path dependence, and the environment conceived as a colloid within which natural selection does its work.

In social thought, the idea of an open system is often associated with Niklas Luhmann, and more particularly with his idea of "auto-poiesis." This beautiful term indicates his belief that human beings create, through mutual exchange, the systems of value by which they live, and that the more they exchange with one another, the more individuated they become. Yet the exchanges he has in mind are verbal. The world of built forms has no presence in these exchanges, and as it were, no voice of its own.

The idea of an urban open system is that physical forms should be given a consequent voice; put less poetically, there is interaction between physical creation and social behavior. What we call "agency" in a city is a colloid of these two different activities. To put this more concretely, we need only invoke the name of the great

urbanist Jane Jacobs.

Against the over-determined vision of Le Corbusier, Jacobs argued that places should become both dense and diverse, either in the form of dense streets or packed squares; such physical conditions can prompt the unexpected encounter, the chance discovery, the innovation which is the genius loci of cities. Healthy, clean, and safe: you can experience these environmental virtues in a suburb, if you are rich enough, but only a certain kind of place, an open city, will stimulate you -- and that stimulation comes in particular form. Jacobs says, in a famous declaration, "if density and diversity give life, the life they breed is disorderly." The open city feels like Naples, the closed city feels like Frankfurt.

An entire school of urbanism has arisen on this foundation, practical as well as analytic. Analytically, it avers that big capitalism and powerful developers tend to favor closure and homogeneity, determinate, predictable, and balanced in form; the role of the radical planner therefore is to champion dissonance. In practical planning, if a city is opened up, it will allow jerry-built adaptations or additions to existing buildings; it will encourage uses of public spaces which don't fit neatly together, such as putting an AIDS hospice square in the middle of a shopping street.

The stimulations of an open city may seem a larger reflection of William Empson's bon mot that "the arts result from over-crowding."   Yet there's a divide among open-city urbanists who share this general frame of mind. Jacobs privileges spontaneous combustion: crowd people together informally, and they will compete, collude, gossip, innovate. It's sheer physical density in itself which is the stimulus.

Sympathetic as I have always been to her, here we part company; to me, the spatial

forms density takes are what matter in stimulating people of the physical matters more

in shaping the open city. Urban design, as design, does not figure much in her version

of the open city; the art of design matters in mine.

I'd like to conclude tonight by presenting to you three ways in which I think an

open city can be well designed. These designs involve creating ambiguous edges

between parts of the city, contriving incomplete forms in buildings, and planning for

unresolved narratives of development. As I say, we could explore each into the small

hours of the morning, so I'll try to say too briefly what is my own approach.

Ambiguous edges: Steven Gould draws our attention to an important distinction

in natural ecologies between two kinds of edges: boundaries and borders. The

boundary is an edge where things end; the border is an edge where difference groups

interact. At borders, organisms become more inter-active, due to the meeting of

different species or physical conditions; for instance, where the shoreline of a lake

meets solid land is an active zone of exchange where organisms find and feed off other

organisms. Not surprisingly, it is also at the borderline where the work of natural

selection is the most intense. Whereas the boundary is a guarded territory, as

established by prides of lions or packs of wolves. No transgression at the boundary:

Keep Out! Which means the edge itself is dead.

We want as well to consider another natural edge condition, that at the cellular

level. This is the distinction between a cell wall and a cell membrane. The cell wall

retains as much as possible internally; it is analogous to a boundary. The cell

membrane is more open, more like a border -- but membranes reveal something important about what "open" means. The membrane does not function like an open door; a cell membrane is both porous and resistant at the same time, holding in some valuable elements of the city, letting other valuable elements flow through the membrane. Think of the distinction between wall and membrane as a difference in degree: at the cellular level, conservation and resistance are part of the equation which produces openness.

These natural differences between boundary/wall and border/membrane clarify closed and open built form. The boundary/wall dominates the modern city. The urban habitat is cut up into segregated parts by streams of traffic, by functional isolation between zones for work, commerce, family, and the public realm. The most popular form of new residential development internationally, the gated community, takes to an extreme the idea of the boundary wall. The result is that exchange between different racial, ethnic, or class communities diminishes. So we should want to build the border/membrane.

Only Connect! E.M. Forster's injunction may seem pious and well-meaning, but it has some disturbing implications in urban design.   I'll give you an example from my own planning practice. Some years ago I was involved in plans for creating a market to serve the Hispanic community of Spanish Harlem in New York. This community, one of the poorest in the city, lies above 96th Street on Manhattan's upper east side. Just below 96th Street, in an abrupt shift, lies one of the richest communities in the world, running from 96th down to 59th Street, comparable to Mayfair in London or the 7th

Arrondissement in Paris.

When people usually imagine where the life of a community is to be found, they usually look for it in the center of a community; to strengthen community life, planners try to intensify life at the center, which means neglecting the edge. Thus my team chose to locate La Marqueta in the center of Spanish Harlem twenty blocks away, in the very center of the community, and to regard 96th Street as a dead edge, where nothing much happens. We chose wrongly. Had we located the market on that street, we might have encouraged activity which brought the rich and the poor into some daily commercial, physical contact. Wiser planners have since learned from our mistake, and on the West Side of Manhattan sought to locate new community resources at the edges between communities, in order, as it were, to make porous borders. This wisdom is a form of visual/social creation; it is, pace Jane Jacobs, form making, and, pace Niklas Luhmann, a spatial poiesis.

Incomplete form: Incomplete form is a creative credo. In the plastic arts it is conveyed in sculpture purposely left unfinished; in poetry it is conveyed in, to use Wallace Steven's phrase, the "engineering of the fragment." The architect Peter Eisenman has sought to evoke something of the same credo in the term "light architecture," meaning an architecture planned so that it can be added to, or more importantly, revised internally in the course of time as the needs of habitation change. This form of building is the antidote to the over-determined city I spoke of earlier

Incomplete form is not as easy to design as it might seem. Form and function need to be lightly connected if not actually divorced. The reason is that as the function

of a building changes historically, the form can only adapt if it's not over-determined, as I said before. If, like a Georgian row house, the form is simple -- in this case, basically a building in the form of a shoe-box -- then it can become flexible. But most modern buildings, especially tall ones, have complex infrastructures for lighting, heating plumbing, and electricity. It's hard to make this infrastructure adapt to new purposes; for instance, recent efforts to convert office towers on Wall Street into apartment buildings have proved costly and unsatisfying. Incomplete form challenges the design ideal of a physical object as fit for purpose. Instead, the challenge of incomplete form is how to use new technologies to make building both simpler and more flexible in operation. Once we break the strangle-hold of function on form, once buildings are less tightly fit-for-purpose, they can become living, evolving structures.

Understanding all this is important even if you aren't an urban designer, because incomplete form is a basic principle in the good conduct of social life in general. In sociology, incomplete form goes by the name of "dialogics." In everyday social life, it's what we mean by good listening skills, or by sensing what people mean to say but can't find exactly the right words for, or by putting disconnected bits of ideas together when people talk to one another. In all these cases, we acknowledge that people do not think or speak in Flaubert's perfectly concise and clear sentences; more, we recognise that they may be struggling with ideas or emotions too complicated to be expressed in fluent, and as it were, well-greased prose. And so we are obliged to interpret silences or fragments, to make sense of incomplete expression. This rich texture can be diminished if in a school-master fashion we would declare "what you really mean to say

is" or "to be clear, you have made the following three points …" Dialogics is the study of that complexity which transcends clarity. Moreover, ambiguity and indirectness can play a liberating role in social relations; they can both provoke us and make us reflect. These virtues are, I believe, as productive in constructing the physical world as in making good social relationships.

At the larger urban scale, finally, the same logic of incompleteness applies to what I'll called unresolved narratives of development.

Unresolved narrative: lastly, let us consider the bodice-ripper or other sentimental novel. All the incidents in such well-made narrative get resolved by the end, when a satisfying catharsis occurs in which everything falls into place -- the servant-girl heroine marries the lord of the manor, or the villain is finally unmasked. The narrative has clarity; in technical terms, it's linear, which means the plot pushes forward as in a straight-line sequence. Linear narratives contrast to dialogical sequences: a clarifying meaning appears in the linear narrative, at least in Victorian fictional ones, whereas in dialogics, things can get more and more cloudy. Most simply, the linear narrative aims forward at a conclusion, whereas the dialogic encounter emphasizes sheer process.

Indeed, planning a closed city is indeed equivalent to plotting a bodice-ripper. The close-minded planner wants to envision from the very first all the results at the end – and unfortunately, planning law in Britain demands such specification down to the most minor details of sidewalk height and width, or lighting intensity on a new street; a surprising discovery about sub-surface or local ambiance is treated as interfering with the plan, as getting in the way of realizing the objective. Lock-step, linear clarity from

beginning to end is meant to rule realization.

Real life rarely follows the script of a linear narrative, and in the actual process of development this compulsive clarity is rarely practical. None-the-less, in all planning work we are thinking in terms of narrative, in another sense of that word; we focus on the stages in which a particular project unfolds. This can a matter of the if-then sort of logical thinking, or it can be a more adventurous logic -- what next, what-if? But still we are trying to think out events in terms of consequences rather than as a random series.

Planning in the open city, like open systems in mathematics and the natural world, should embrace non-linear forms of sequence. Over the years, I've evolved a way of working with clients which involves rolling evaluations at critical stages of the work; we've re-priced schools, cut or added rooms to health clinics, changed the specifications for kitchens and bathrooms in housing, as the work moved along. I've tried to combine my own stubborn authority with a certain kind of democracy in this rolling-process; I decide when the critical stage of a re-think has arrived, my clients – usually local communities – do most of the re-thinking. This may seem just like common-sense to you; in a good scientific laboratory, rolling evaluation would be the normal practice. But the practical drives urban authorities up the wall; it may be one of the reasons I don't get to do as much practical work as I'd like. So indulge my frustration -- or is it my neurosis.

Imagine a scientist in the lab who declares, I'm just going to test an hypothesis right-or-wrong; if the experiment throws up some extraneous matters to that test, I'm going to ignore these matters. This would be a very mediocre scientist indeed. If a

novelist were to announce at the beginning of a story, here's what will happen, what the characters will become, and what the story means, we would not bother to read the book.

Open-city planning attends to conflicts and possibilities in sequence; there's problem-solving, but also problem-finding, discovery rather than merely clarity. All good narrative has the property of exploring the unforeseen, of discovery; the novelist's art is to shape the process of that exploration. The urban designer's art is akin.

In this talk I've compressed a big contrast, that between the closed and open city. Closed means over-determined, balanced, integrated, linear. Open means incomplete, errant, conflictual, non-linear. The closed city is full of boundaries and walls; the open city possesses more borders and membranes. The closed city can be designed and operated top-down; it is a city which belongs to the masters. The open city is a bottom-up place; it belongs to the people. These contrasts of course are not absolutes of black-and-white; real life is painted in greys. Yet to design the modern city well, I believe we have to challenge unthinking assumptions now made about urban life, assumptions which favor closure. I believe we have to embrace less re-assuring, more febrile ideas of living together, those stimulations of differences, both visual and social, which produce openness.

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