



COMMENTARY: WHAT IS A GOOD CITY?

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¹ Author credit: The order of the author is according to the alphabetical order of their last names

In search of Eden, an allegory of perfection, every generation of planners and architects across the ages have attempted to craft their own versions of utopia, in hopes of creating a better city than the one they lived in; where values they cared about can manifest in ways that lead society into a state of human flourishing. Ebenezer Howard's vision for "To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform" (1898) birthed in the late nineteenth century at a time when industrialization had resulted in overcrowding, unsanitary living conditions, pollution, and inequity, is a notable example of the social reformist zeal innate in the profession of urban planning (Figure 1). Howard proposed a vision of a new city where its inhabitants could enjoy both the advantages of residing in a town and a country, as he held the belief that "human society and the beauty of nature are meant to be enjoyed together" (Howard 1898).

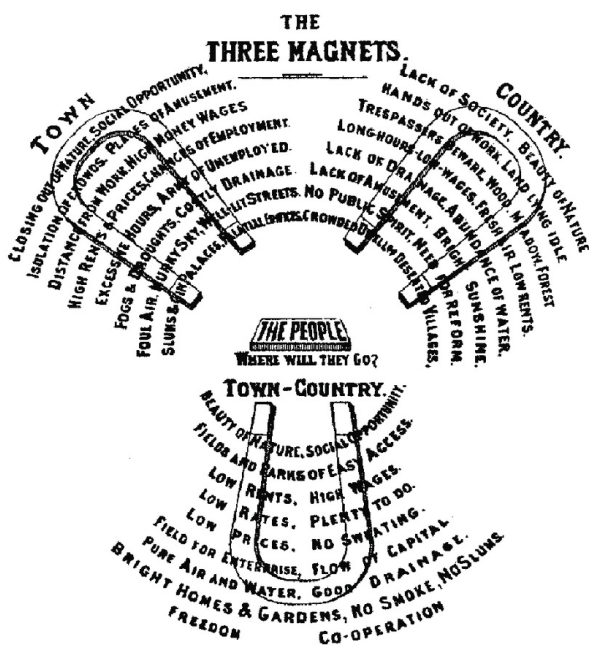


Figure 1: The Town-Country Magnet (Howard 1898)

We asked our young and pioneer planners for their views on what a good city is, with the intention of getting a glimpse into the generational similarities and differences of urban vision given their different experiences and memories of Singapore and of the world. Even though the young planners are still at an early stage of their professional lives to form their opinions of what a good city is, they were much quicker to respond to this question than the pioneer planners. The pioneer planners with their years of practicing planning and seeing how urban planning in Singapore and the rest of the world have evolved, realized that ideals need to be tempered with the constraints of relative realities. As the famous saying attributed to Aristotle goes: the more you know, the more you know you don't know. Thus, unsurprisingly, the pioneer planners demonstrated a reluctance to articulate definitively what a good city is. However, we took the liberty (with their consent) to read their convictions of what the traits of a good city are between their lines. It is our intention here that when the views of pioneer and young planners are

considered together, they will reveal how urban planning needs to be thought of as an intergenerational responsibility because every planning decision manifests tangibly in the built environment with long-term effects on how future generations live in the city.

"A good city is one that always benefits the people who live in it"

In our focus group discussion with the young planners, one planner said with youthful conviction that what is ultimately important is this: the city must always benefit the people who live in it, in terms of convenience and support to their daily lives. For the pioneer planners, they spoke about a good city life as one that is delightful in which city dwellers can feel connected and enjoy living in. However, as Mr Foo Chee See very quickly pointed out when we raised the question, there is no single model of a good city. Every city is different and must be taken as a unique entity; what is good is specific to each city's context and changes with time.

An excerpt from the focus group discussion with young planners

"What is a Good City from Your Point of View?"

AT

I'll start first... I think cities should be creative and should be able to adapt to the changing circumstances, be it politics or social aspects. It has to adapt to fit people's needs. Also a caring city - the people inhabiting it are not neglected.

FC

A good city should bring delight to people!

AT

It doesn't have to be super beautiful or monumental. It is about everyday spaces.

AK

Maybe, convenience? Something that ultimately benefits the people who live in it, and for me, convenience is one major component.

YW

I think for me — nurturing and imperfect. I think if something is too perfect there is no motivation for people to do better. Sometimes people don't have the drive or incentive to make changes because everything is already done, people get used to it, and they start feeling entitled and apathetic.

Vitality	The degree to which the form of the settlement supports the vital functions, the biological requirements and capabilities of human beings - above all, how it protects the survival of the species.
Sense	The degree to which the settlement can be clearly perceived and mentally differentiated and structured in time and space by its residents and the degree to which that mental structure connects with their values and concepts
Fit	The degree to which the form and capacity of spaces, channels, and equipment in a settlement match the pattern and quantity of actions that people customarily engage in, or want to engage in.
Access	The ability to reach other persons, activities, resources, services, information, or places, including the quantity and diversity of the elements which can be reached.
Control	The degree to which the use and access to spaces and activities, and their creation, repair, modification, and management are controlled by those who use, work, or reside in them.
Efficiency (meta-criteria)	The cost, in terms of other valued things, of creating and maintaining the settlement, for any given level of attainment of the environmental dimensions listed above.
Justice (meta-criteria)	The way in which environmental benefits and costs are distributed among persons according to some particular principle such as equity, need, intrinsic worth, ability to pay, effort expended, potential contribution, or power. Justice is the criterion which balances the gains among persons, while efficiency balances the gains among different values.

Table 1: Lynch's (1981) Dimensions of Performance

A good city needs to adapt to the evolving needs of its inhabitants over time. The idea that cities should possess adaptive capacities is not new. American urban planner and designer Kevin Lynch in his book *Good City Form* (1981), likened a city to a dynamic and ever-evolving ecology. He posited that cities are ecosystems characterized by diversity, interdependence, and feedback processing capabilities, in addition to having values, culture, and the ability to learn and invent. Despite the relative opportunities and constraints faced in each city, Lynch distilled five dimensions of performance and two meta-criteria of a good city form which can be used to measure the goodness of the city form for its inhabitants (Table 1). To sum up, as a young planner puts it succinctly, "A good city is one that you find beauty in everyday life!"

"A good city nurtures and cares for the land and people living in it"

Reflecting upon the interviews with the pioneer planners, they lamented about the fast-paced urban redevelopment in Singapore and articulated ways in which the city can be developed in a more sustainable mode that takes greater care to nurture the interpersonal human relations and social connections among people. This brings to mind Lynch's view in *Good City Form* (1981), in which he described a good settlement as one that promotes

the maintenance of the culture and survival of its people, enhancing their sense of connection in time and space, and one that encourages individual growth and flourishing.

Putting this in light of the growing public lament among Singaporeans about the loss of urban social memory as satirically reflected in the observation that the urban crane is the national bird of Singapore (Mynah Magazine 2023), it stirs in us good city visions of how to enable urban dwellers to grow and experience rooting in ephemeral urban landscapes as the relationship between urban dwellers and their land becomes increasingly transactional and transient. Recognising both the pain and the beneficial transformative potential that urban redevelopment can bring to a city, planners will need greater capacity of care and sensitivity to undertake the urban changes in the coming decades by being cognizant of the holistic values that different urban spaces offer residents and the importance of equitably reconciling different needs in a city.

"A good city is an imperfect place"

Garud et al. (2008) state that incompleteness is generative as it is a trigger for the creation of many diverse ideas on how a design can be extended and further developed. In the same vein, one young planner pointed out that Singapore can be too perfect to the extent that "there is no motivation

in people to make changes because everything is done for them and they start feeling entitled and apathetic” so much so that a sense of ownership and spirit of participating in the shaping of the city is lacking. This view was shared by pioneer planner Mr Tan Cheng Siong whose major concern for the urban future of Singapore is the increasing apathy among the citizenry. His belief in participatory planning of the city is well-rooted in the importance of growing relational connections among urban dwellers of different generations, and between people and urban space – an agenda that the Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group (SPUR) also championed since its inception in the 1960s. Their publications allude to a good city as one that is characterized by a productive exchange of ideas and perspectives among planners, and between planners and the public (Koh, Chan, and Chew 1967).

Concluding thoughts

Taken together, these perspectives of a good city raise a profound question: Is the search for the urban Eden, an epitome of earthly perfection, an impossible endeavor, and one destined for disappointment? Planning disasters have recurred over centuries; in fact, the more ambitious a planning enterprise gets, the risk of a twisted unintentional outcome becomes ever more plausible. It makes Daniel Burnham’s famous saying, “*Make no little plans,*” an unwittingly ironic warning for planners. Should planners even dare entertain the concept and vision of making a good city? Is a good city a perfect city?

Perfection awakens our senses to imperfection. Imperfection inspires perfection. To strive towards perfection is to strive to be as good as possible. Thus, achieving goodness requires a struggle with the imperfect state and the brokenness of the urban and human condition. The struggle recognizes that the battle against urban entropy is never over. A good city is essentially a humble work in progress that is fully aware of human imperfection and the need for care in relating to one another. Nurturing and growth flourish in a place like this!

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She enjoys researching urban issues from a socio-spatial angle, and loves experiencing cities by walking.

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She delights in exploring the everyday spaces in cities and in observing the different ways of life within them. She finds even more delight when these observations are accompanied by a good cup of coffee.

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