

## **VISIONS FOR LIVABLE CITIES**

(A lecture presented to the Youth Environmental Summit - November 21, 1998)

### **INTRODUCTION**

This gathering looks at the subject of cities from the point of view of an environment for living. I am sure that you will also be interested in the effect of the city on the greater natural environment and its relationship to the concept of sustainability. In those contexts, I've got some good news for you; I believe that on our small island, we can design and manage solutions to the relatively clear problems which relate to the destruction of the natural systems which sustain us. The problems in these areas are definable and solvable. The bad news is that we don't all want to solve them, or even see them as problems. Anyway, I am not going to tell you how to clean harbours, collect garbage, treat sewage or punish litterbugs. I would like to get at least some of you to think a little about the fact that we are not basically an urban society and what the implications of this fact are. A good place to start is by looking where cities come from. I would like to fix in your minds that the History of cities is the same as the History of Human Culture. I would also like to plant the seed of the idea that everything happens for a reason and this means that we *can* solve our problems and are not at the mercy of the Gods.

### **THE ORIGINS OF CITIES**

There are many types of cities - They have different characters based on their purpose for existence and their location. Yes, cities don't exist without a purpose:

Some started as administrative and servicing outposts of Empires. Many European cities were founded this way by Greeks and Romans and other conquerors.

Later Empire Builders established Port outposts with connections back to the homeland, such as Port Royal and Falmouth and New York.

Others Cities, like Machu Pichu in Peru, Mexico City and Rome grew up around Religious, Ceremonial centers or were - just outright - founded by the Gods.

More recently we have "Boom Cities" such as Las Vegas which mushroom over a few years into massive artifacts which look like cities but are really small towns next to Industrial Plants.

Others had their origins as very humble commercial centers and in their growth we can seek some understanding of our lives:

Lets start with - say - a crossroads, where some ancient higgler set up shop to serve the passers-by and was joined by her friend for company and then by other opportunists who saw that she was "on to a good thing". Then maybe, some decided that it was too far to go home at night and built small homes and one thing led to another and a village grew and then a town and then it all got so

big that the services that it offered to the travelers were equaled by its own needs for support and the population grew even bigger as teachers came to teach the many children of the many higgler (now merchants) and butchers and bakers and candlestick makers came into being and firemen got invented to put out the fires of so many people living so close and some people became criminals and others policemen and judges.

Then the people found that they could no longer communally manage all of this and there developed Professional Managers and when it was found difficult to manage the managers communally, it was thought that respected members of the community should be entrusted with the job of overseeing the managers and we got states-persons and eventually some people developed the ambition to serve the people in this way and others just liked the power which came with the position and actively sought and fought for the job and Politics and Politicians were invented. And there you have it...

By now, the "People" had become the "Citizens" (Lets take a very Jamaican liberty with language and say that this word, "Citizen", was derived from "City's Sons", that is, the Son's and daughters of the City) These People were no longer only the individuals that we all begin and end as, but they were also part of the collective community or *Citizenry* of a human creation called *The City*. This implied that in addition to their own responsibility for themselves they had to accept communal responsibilities or they would not be able to survive living so close together.

While all of this was going on, what was happening Physically?

Well, our higgler was on a roadside between farms and, gradually, as more people came, they spread into what land they could, and bought pieces of land from the farmers and they, the farmers themselves "saw a good thing" and cut up and sold parcels of it and Farmer *Grant's* goat pen became a neighborhood which was ingeniously called "Grants Pen" and a new road was built next to Farmer *Slip's* cow pen and guess what they named it, and a Vineyard became "Vineyard Town" and other opportunists set up at other crossings which took on the names of *their* origins - So the simplest road crossing might be called just plain "Crossroads" or be identified by the tree that was there and the fact that it seemed to be the midpoint of a trip to say another place where there was always dependable water. So the people referred to one as "Half Way Tree" and another as "Constant Spring".

## **PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS**

I hope you have gotten the picture and that you see that the History of the development of the City is that of the development of society and just below the surface is the premise that the History of Cities is the History of Thought and of Ideas.

The other picture to be gotten, is that everything man made is indeed just that - It is made by someone, or results from someone's or group's ingenuity or lack of it.  
The Gods are not to blame - we are.

You may have seen that most of this just happens as people try to solve their individual and

collective problems. It happens without anyone knowing the future.

*Many are the things that man  
Seeing must understand.  
Not seeing, how shall he know  
What lies in the hand  
Of time to come?*

*Sophocles, Ajax*

In other words; How can we plan for a future that we don't know. One way is try to avoid repeating your errors. But, you know, life isn't like that, and *always* makes subtle changes to the problem, so that we are usually busy "not repeating the error" for the wrong problem.

Another way is to accept that solving the problems of the future requires that we make educated guesses as to what is going to happen if we continue on a given course and combine this piece of deduction with a vision of where we want to go.

In yet other words; Don't guess the future, create it!

But, I don't want to mislead you, for although this City (Kingston) grew very much as I have explained, it didn't really start with a higgler. It was preconceived and planned based on a beautiful vision. Unfortunately, that vision which was based on ancient Greek ideas has long ago become irrelevant.

Cities have different shapes but they are of two basic types, those which are pre-conceived and imposed on the landscape, like the original Kingston and Falmouth, and those which grow naturally around traditional paths of communication, like Montego Bay and the extensions of Kingston up into St. Andrew.

Whether they were preconceived or not, no one expected the level of growth which has happened. Neither could anyone have anticipated the change in the quality, not to mention the quantity, of life that we live. People took recreation for granted and concentrated on creating lots for sale. Life wasn't as complex as it is today and because Cities were small enough to exist *within* nature, relief in the country was always a few steps or short ride away.

In olden times the pre-planning of cities was usually reserved for colonial towns where predictably, the most important open space was the Parade Ground for the military. Our city of Kingston was based on such a Greek model for an Ideal Town. Much later than the Greeks but still earlier than Kingston, the Spanish conquerors showed that human thought had moved on and man was indeed able to make guesses about the future and have visions about how he thought people should live. In 1573, –years before the founding of Kingston, King Phillip II of Spain issued Royal Ordinances concerning the laying out of New Towns by settlers in the New World. Detailed directions were given for the size and proportions of the Main Square which was required to form the center of each town. He also directed that "A Common shall be assigned to each town, of adequate size so that even though it should grow greatly, there would be sufficient space for its inhabitants to find

recreation...”

## **PRACTICAL POINTS**

I have finally reached my practical point and it is best demonstrated in the difference between the cities of the Latin Caribbean and those of the British. In these cities, there is a basic difference between attitudes toward open Space and towards the way people live in cities. This plagues us to this day. For whatever reason, The Spanish included not only the Military Parade Ground in their town plans, but allowed for urban squares and Commons for recreational purposes. The original plan of Kingston provide only a Parade Ground which was eventually transformed into an urban square. As the City expanded, the only major open spaces left out of development were two horse racing courses; the first just to the north of the original city ( “Race Course”) and the second further out called Knutsford Park. Knutsford Park was subdivided into what is now New Kingston and that portion of Race Course which is not used for the Tombs of our heros is slated to be the site for a new House of Parliament.

How different this is from Trinidad where some visionary managed to turn their Race Track and its surrounding lands into an immense well maintained Park in the middle of their City. They call it their “Grand Savannah”.

With similar civic mindedness, their House of Parliament (called the Red House) accepts the discipline of the city and emphasizes its importance thru respect for the Citizens by contributing to the definition of the urban square that it stands beside. In this sense it is a monument to the Idea of Parliamentary Democracy. Why then should our new Parliament destroy one of the last public recreation spaces provided for the people it represents.

It is said that the difference between the Latin and the English Caribbean is that the Spanish saw themselves as increasing the breadth of their culture, while the English were basically involved in opportunism to enrich themselves “back home”. Whatever the reason, the Spanish certainly built cities for living in. Indeed, they actually did live in them, for the fact is, that the successful of their societies built their homes within the heart of the city. We have always done the opposite and upward movement in our society is almost synonymous with outward movement - First “out” to Ray Town then further out to Kingston Gardens onward to Vineyard Town, thence Barbican - Cherry Gardens - Norbrook and finally of course “The Hills”.

## **VISION VS. CLASS**

All of this is of course wrapped up with the horrible class system which we have inherited. It is our single greatest handicap and we must all struggle against it. It is the greatest barrier to the development of a common vision for our future.

For example, let me end by sharing with you some of the experiences of living a life worth living in

a city and afterward try to think if many of the local objections to these things, which are taken for granted all over the world, are not based in disrespect for ourselves and our fellow citizens.

Just imagine, eating lunch on a bench in the beautiful strip of park could run along Old Hope Road from Crossroads to Oxford road - or after work just sitting, watching the girls and guys go by; Imagine: *All* children walking to their neighborhood school and being taught by a teacher who also walks to work; Playing football on the neighborhood play field; Having a picnics with your girl or guy in that immense park that can be created from the vacated lands of Up Park Camp. Imagine jogging around a beautiful green set of play fields and the Park which can be created from that piece of land that they used to call "No Man's Land". Imagine sidewalk restaurants on King Street and Harbour Streets; a waterfront promenade similar to that along Ocean Boulevard, but which runs all the way to Rockfort. Imagine a cycle path for here - right around the Harbour to Port Royal. Imagine street dances not only at Ray Town on a Sunday night but at a different square in the city every night. Imagine how the tourists would enjoy being with us on the streets. Imagine no overhead electric lines, no billboards and paved sidewalks on all roads. Imagine no fences to keep in dogs to keep out duppy's. There is much, much more that we could have. Can you see how much richer we would be in every way?

I do believe that we owe ourselves and our descendants such an environment for living, but think that this will be much more difficult to achieve than - say - disposing of our solid waste properly. You see, it requires a change in the way we see ourselves. It requires a common vision which is impossible in such a deeply divided society.

I said at the start that we can solve our problems. I suggested that if you can clearly define a problem, you begin its solution. I thank you for allowing me to participate in the process of defining the problem of achieving a livable city.

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