

## Idea City

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### Three 20<sup>th</sup> Century Theories

The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed three significant futurist theories directed towards the city, backed by groups advocating those positions, and often to the exclusion of other viewpoints. The first of these, formulated from 1931 was Le Corbusier and the CIAM group. The second, proposed from 1932 was by Frank Lloyd Wright, and the Taliesin followers. The third, more recent one from around 1981 by Duany and Plater-Zyberk and the emerging New Urbanists.

Le Corbusier saw both machine and construction technology as the background to La Ville Radieuse and Le Plan Voisin, but also the opportunity to make a new society. Here, vast freeways and parking structures frame large monolithic blocks and expanses of green, open space. The thesis had no respect for the irregularities of existing places, or society for that matter. It also saw massive acts of change, and a regulated, to the point of monolithic, urban block structure, and rapid movement, as each being central to the purpose of molding a new society. As such, the proposition both anticipates, and in a sense forces a new society.

Frank Lloyd Wright and his Taliesin students had, for a variety of reasons, developed an anti-urbanism, and, in the proposed Broadacre City, saw a means by which new American communities could embrace the countryside. This prophetic thesis disaggregated urban form into a reliance on the highway to connect small holdings, centers for community gathering and need, and rural industry. This exploitation of landscape so that community could embrace the countryside, was not only a total

dependence on the automobile, but also a belief that the land was a boundless resource, and that society was best in small groupings. In acts of pronounced individualism, families, industry, and small community could find expression in adopted semi-agrarian (suburban) landscapes, where buildings to a greater or lesser degree punctuated the highway edge.

The new urbanists fermented in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and expressed disdain for each of these previous positions, and their outcomes. More particularly, they believed that the American laissez faire marketplace and the home building industry have, and are, creating the meaningless, disaggregated ugly mess we generally call "sprawl". In looking almost exclusively at the needs of the family, particularly the middle class and their current environments, they saw the need to reformat these unacceptable spatial equations. They believe (in a manner reminiscent of William Morris) that society should return to the village cluster and adopt spatial form, methods of building, and forms of social interaction with a nostalgia for the past. One can see a townscape pastiche of the New England village from a visual dimension, combined with a reworking of the performance standards of the Garden City movement. That movement had a fundamentally different social purpose in providing affordable homes for low income blue-collar workers in a much improved environmental and social setting, and with a dependence on walking and public transit. A number of the devices for organizing street widths, sidewalks, planting, house grouping, and small town center, are, however, undoubtedly important references to this group in building a vocabulary of residential design

dimensions that act as a source book for the spread of these small clustered developments.

### Critique

Whereas most of the rhetoric never found direct manifestation, each of these positions has had an effect, sometimes extensive, on the 20<sup>th</sup> century landscape, the latter aiming to shape the first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The first theory failed us miserably, and left a legacy of unloved, and non-sustainable environments. Particularly unfortunate have been the dense, low income housing blocks, the monolithic office buildings, the urban highways, the abolition of the street, and the fact that many of the green spaces did not transpire. Wright's "vision" has clearly been adopted, but without the benefit of the all-important community architect, espousing Wright's aesthetic values. Over time, it has proved to be a dangerous nonsense, offering low density, and hence extensive service runs and travel distance, and been frightening in its land take. The theory also bears no relationship to our current bludgeoning, multi-ethnic populations, more restricted supplies of land, or our current understandings of traffic congestion and energy usage.

Much is yet to be learned regarding New Urbanist communities and the ways their projects might mature over time, but already significant questions are to be raised. It can be argued that they form exclusive, detached communities of like families, locked into an artificial world. As such, their projects encourage commuting, draining energy off the city, and thus not embracing the principal challenges that the main stream of society must face. They could, therefore, be seen as a bandaid, or even as a means to redefine white flight from the city.

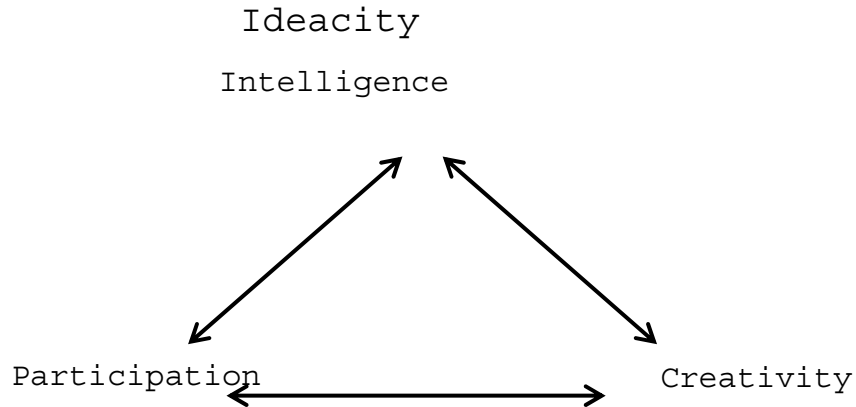
I suggest that each of these theories fell short by having pre-determined views of what type of society was desirable, and particularly what physical form it should take. Not only is there a misunderstanding of the complexity and diversity of society, but also of the wider implications of these designed environments and their impact on both technology and resources.

Society (even including some political leaders), is slowly becoming aware that we are not

directly addressing a major social and environmental battle that, as a consequence, has been largely lost. We have fostered an untenable and unsustainable world of failed environments. This has engendered a crisis of confidence and a possible design insecurity in addressing the future. Design, directed towards a keen understanding of a city and its region, aimed at change, but also achievable, appears to be almost absent in schools of architecture.

### Idea City

The focus of industry, intelligence, population growth, and for that matter urban and environmental problems, has been largely based on the city. I believe that the future will be determined by the "intelligent city" and its region acting in unison. In moving away from international conflict, imperialism, exhaustion of natural resources, city regions can develop a body of creativity and innovation, acting as a catalyst to others, and in turn offering our greatest hope for the future. Richard Florida, in his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, shows the importance of cities in a more pluralistic sense, identifying connections between a city's realm of intelligence and ideas and its overall quality of life, and hence sense of identity and uniqueness. This is the basis to the principle of Idea City, where diverse strands of creative thought and opportunity can be interconnected. A new urban consciousness can not only be receptive to invention and new and alternative lifestyles, but may be in a better position to confront daunting physical and social problems. The first recommendation, therefore, is to move towards a more pluralistic, inclusive society open to ideas, and both integrative and supportive through collaboration and transparency of decision making. This in turn, though on a relatively limited basis, has turned to a greater respect for the land, and a closer understanding that city, rather than exploiting, must be in a close and protective dialogue with its hinterland. This leads me to suggest a thesis that is not prescriptive, but descriptive and creative in suggesting environments that designers can frame towards a more sustainable future. This appears to be a direction that a number of cities are taking in forming a new basis of intelligence, including London, San Francisco, and Austin, Texas.

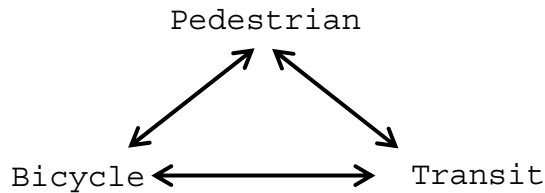


**Connectedness**

Counter to the last stages of resource intensive individualistic movement, the future must be based upon sustainable accessibility for all members of society. Key considerations are to foster a closely connected city matrix of small city blocks, attractive connectors, and dispersed amenity. This facilitates walking, meeting, and access to a greater range of opportunities close to home or work. Low cost, low energy, non

polluting, transit, will be the most viable future form of movement for the majority of cities. It should also be designed with close connection to a much improved street environment for cyclists and pedestrians. This encourages alternative means of movement within and between cities, and also to the recreational resources and open space systems of the city. Work now taking place in a range of cities, including Hong Kong, London, Freiburg, Portland, Oregon, demonstrates the adoption of this model.

The Connected City

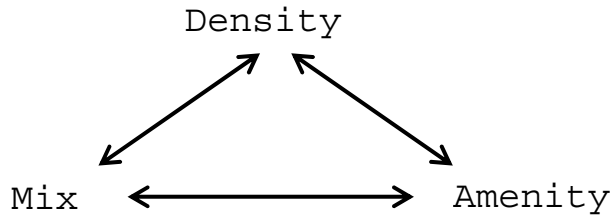


**Compact City**

We need to move to re-establishing the compact city through sensible and close association of uses, buildings, and places. Architectural invention is needed to explore groupings, height, density, and mix of uses in moving towards denser, affordable long life environments. The development of a city

culture for living that abandons the "mcmansion" and separation of uses, and in addition offers greater benefit to young, old, and the poor is a key criterion. Through close association of home, work places, facilities and amenity, new spatial organizations can be formed. Stockholm, Rotterdam, Leeds, each house good examples towards this end.

The Compact City

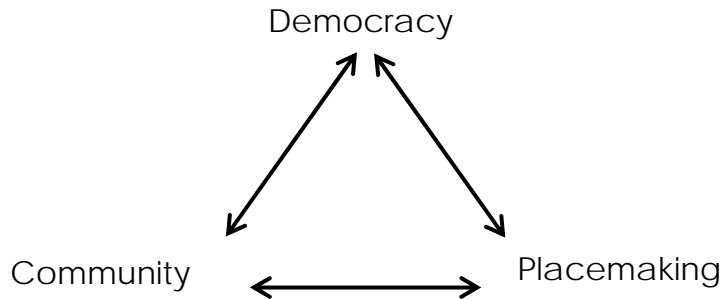


**Placemaking**

The creation of urban place is the distinguishing feature of a democratic society in offering a sense of community, security, and livability to the public domain. Much is currently being learned regarding the creation of meaningful places from the scale of neighborhood, to street places, central city,

and civic places. Each brings a new city life at human scale, where people engage each other in public space, and is only possible by giving the city back to its people, and restricting automobile usage. Leading cities in this regard would be Lyon, Copenhagen, Curitiba, and Melbourne.

City Places



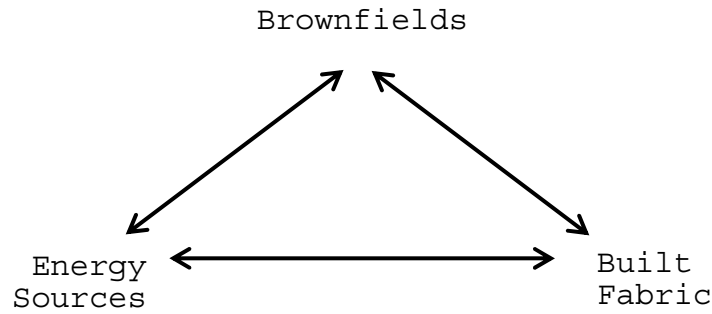
**Resourcefulness**

Cities must develop more locally based and revolutionary energy and water systems that offer it a more sustainable base. Water collection, distribution, and recycling is becoming the key consideration in a city's economy, growth, and ability to offer greenery. Off grid energy supplies are also being taken seriously in a move to make buildings generators as well as consumers of energy. Vauban, Freiburg; Millennium Village, Greenwich, London; and BEDZED,

Beddington, London, each provide strong indicators of revised energy and water systems.

An equally important aspect of the resourceful city is a revised focus upon the redevelopment of brownfield (formerly developed, often industrial) sites, and the saving of existing buildings for adaptation and reuse. This has the advantage of saving land, keeping a presence of history, but is also bringing substantial savings in energy usage.

The Resourceful City

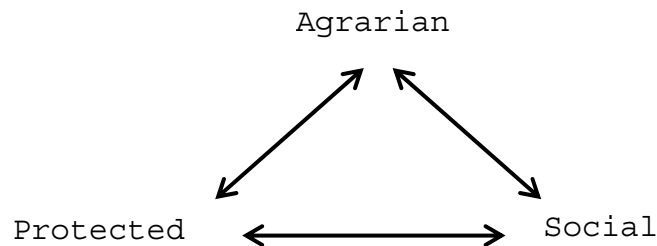


**Greening the City**

Few cities have recognized the importance of their region and the need to protect its natural, agrarian, and recreational resources. The city region increasingly must become the source of food, water, and provision of energy for the city. Those cities that have protected their hinterland, notably London; Portland, Oregon; Boulder, Colorado; have received significant benefit in both improved amenity and in stimulating compact growth.

The role of parks and major greenways in the city is of equal importance in offering amenity, recreation space, and increased opportunity to reduce a city's pollution. The 2012 London Olympics is focused upon clearing the largest brownfield site in Europe to create park systems that offer amenity, recreation, protected green spaces, water supply, as well as helping the deprived east side of London develop a uniqueness equal to the more privileged west side of the city.

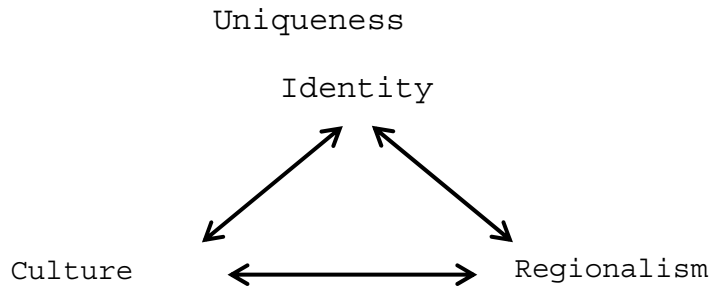
The Green City



**Uniqueness**

Each city is special with its own characters and sense of identity. Designers can help identify and develop the particular integrity, character, and magic of a given place and region. This offers a sense of belonging and

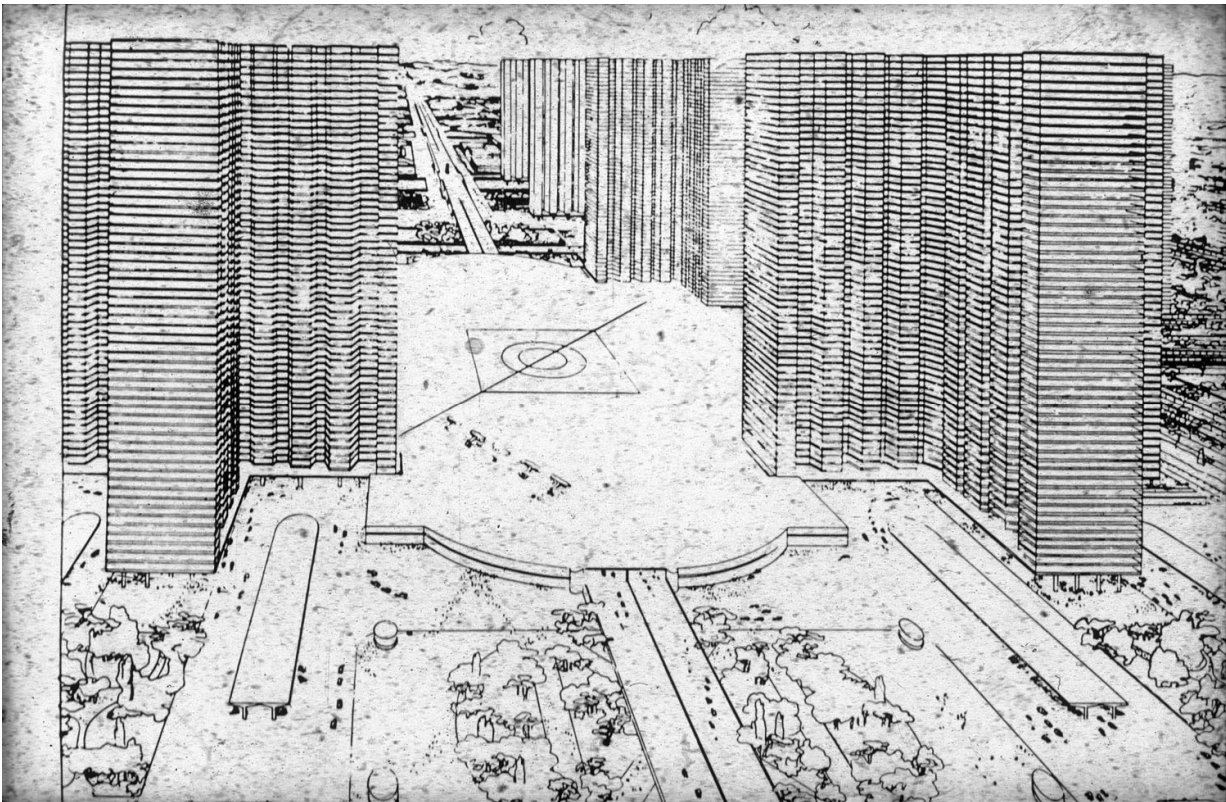
significance beyond the practical. It is indicative that Portland, Oregon; Liverpool, England; and Bilbao, Spain are, historically, less than distinguished cities, but are now developing a heightened identity beyond their size.



These areas of design inquiry and intelligence lead to a revised framework for considering city design in the future. Design becomes more inclusive, central, and locally-based, but aimed towards key principles for improved environmental benefit and quality of life. Undoubtedly, this is radically different from the aforementioned theories, or futuristic projects emerging from a school of

architecture. This suggested framework might develop a matrix of association for the future city, and its values and independencies as indicated in the following diagram. Design should thus simultaneously address a series of key inter related contexts and opportunities that in turn reinforce each other in developing the city of the future.

#### Appendix/Images



**Theory 1**  
*Ville Radieuse*



**Theory Two**  
*Broadacre City*



**Theory Three**  
*New Urbanist Village*



**Idea City:**  
*Connect, Compact, Place, Resource, Green, Unique*



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